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The Deconstruction of Butterflies

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

Katrina Kimbril

BA Southeastern University, Lakeland, FL, 2002

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Mirage

Mazy lingered between sleeping and waking until the fan in her hand clattered to the floor. She looked over at Kate who was lying in bed surrounded by fluffy feather pillows and white lacy linens. Relieved that Kate had not awoken and that no other slaves were present to witness her neglect, Mazy vigorously fanned the air around Kate's face and auburn curls. Her pink skin, no longer clammy with the dew of fever, was now as perfect as one of the porcelain dolls bought for the baby girl Kate had given birth to just a few days ago. Mazy cautiously stretched her hand toward Kate's forehead to see if the fever had returned but recoiled just before her palm touched Kate's skin. Instead, Mazy carefully set the fan at the foot of the bed and quietly left the room.

Kate's eyelids fluttered open the moment she was alone. It was strange, this sudden feeling of aloneness was nearly palpable. She had spent very few moments of her life completely alone; so few in fact, that she remembered them all.

There was the time when Kate was five and she was left alone in a strange house. Her father had some business with a recently widowed plantation owner in LaGrange. Upon their arrival, the plantation owner gave Kate a porcelain doll as a gift and sent her to the nursery to be tended by her mammy so that the adults could discuss business. The plantation owner's son, Tom, was curious about the little girl who'd taken over his old nursery.

He walked into the room with his hands clasped behind his back and inspected the girl as though she were a new piece of furniture. When he finally spoke, his tone of voice was that of a

grown up rather than a twelve year old. “Is this what all the fuss is about?” He crouched down in front of her and stared into her face. Then he reached over and straightened the ribbon on her head and waited. Clutching the doll she’d been given, Kate only stared back at him.

“Don’t you speak?” Tom snatched the doll from her hand and held it above his head.

“She gets real shy around strangers, Master Tom. And your daddy gave that doll-baby to her, not to you,” said Kate’s mammy.

Tom held up a finger to silence the mammy, “I wasn’t speaking to you.” He turned back to Kate. “You can have it back when you say ‘please.’”

When Kate said nothing, he grabbed one of her curls and tugged until she screamed.

“That girl is going to be your wife one day. She’s a lot younger than you, and that ain’t no way to treat her.” Kate’s mammy grabbed Tom’s arm and pulled him out of the room so quickly that he dropped the doll. The head of the doll cracked open when it hit the floor, and its eyes stared up at Kate as if asking her to join it in its empty-headedness. A shadow in the mirror on the wall caught her eye, and when she tried to look into the glass, it was gone. She looked around the room and realized that, for the first time in her life, she was alone.

When the mammy came back into the room, she found Kate frightened and crying. Kate was comforted by the warmth of mammy’s skin, the smell of her hair, the rising and falling of her chest, the quiet hum in her breath as she whispered “Angel of God.”

Eleven years later, on the night before Kate’s wedding, Mother slipped into the room and dismissed the bridesmaids who giggled when she said, “I have something to say to my daughter, and it isn’t for the ears of anyone but her.” After everyone left the room, Mother sat on the corner of the pink chaise and stayed there so poised and straight that she looked more like a statue than a person. Her gray features and her gray hair had somehow become paler after the

door closed and left her alone with her daughter. Mother stared at a spot on the floor with such intention that Kate thought there must have been a stain perceptible only to the gray woman. Finally, Mother cleared her throat and spoke, but she never stopped looking at that spot.

“Katherine, you will be married tomorrow, and there are things you do not know. There are things your tutors and mammies would not have taught you. Marriage is difficult. Men are not always easy to live with, but you must remember that you are not always a pleasure either. When Tom is your husband, he will have enough to occupy his mind without worrying about what is going on inside of yours. It is best that you do your duty and keep quiet about your own discomfort.” She paused to clear her throat.

“Mother, I’m afraid,” Kate whispered.

“Your duty will be difficult at first, but it is a wife’s responsibility to make her husband happy.” Mother rubbed her hands together as if she was cold. “Do not forget that you aren’t the only woman in the world, and your husband is choosing to marry you. That is his gift to you. You may run his household, but you cannot run his life. You cannot make choices for him, and it is best for you to keep your opinions about his choices to yourself. Be sure that your bed is always more inviting than anywhere else he may want to be.”

Mother rose abruptly from the chaise and left the room, shutting the door quietly, leaving Kate completely alone for the second time in her life. She picked up her favorite doll and hugged it for comfort. As she rocked herself back and forth, she whispered, “Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God’s love commits me here.”

The next morning, she asked her father to give her the new house girl, Mazy, as a wedding gift, so she wouldn’t have to go into her new life alone.

Even this gift could not protect her. After only nine months of marriage, Kate prepared for the arrival of her first child. Though the baby was too early, she suffered a day-and-a-half of labor pains though the midwife did everything she could to delay the birth. When the doctor arrived, he listened to Kate's breathing, felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, and nodded.

When the infant was delivered into the world, quiet and still, the midwife wrapped him in a blanket and took him out of the room. The doctor commanded Kate to rest before he rushed out behind the midwife. Mazy, overcome with tears, left to get some water. Kate was exhausted and alone for the third time, and it terrified her. She cried out for the child. She screamed at the door. She tried to get out of the bed but was too weak to move.

Eventually, Mazy brought the porcelain-skinned boy into the room and laid him into Kate's arms. He was heavy and cold, like a stone. She held him until his skin purpled, and she had cried so long that she made herself ill. Even when she finally allowed him to be buried, she stayed in the room surrounded by black drapes, veil covered mirrors, and funereal shrouds on the bed posts. She wouldn't allow any signs of mourning to be removed for fear that the infant's young soul might still be lingering. He hadn't been baptized, and she worried that the angels who escorted souls into Heaven might not have come for him after all. For weeks, she prayed and lit candles and cried out for God's mercy on behalf of her child.

In the months that followed, Tom tried to convince her to go with him to New Orleans for a change of scenery, but she wanted to stay by her baby's cradle and toys. She wore her white nightdress and moved dolls from room to room, holding them and singing to them as she did so.

"Don't you want to buy pretty dresses?" Tom would ask. "We need cloth for the house servants and new linens. We need to stock up the kitchen. You'll like that, picking out things for the house. You always like that." Tom pleaded with her, but she wouldn't acknowledge him. "I

need you to check on the house in the city and make sure it's in good order. We'll have to host some merchants, and I hear the new diplomat's wife is very kind. I'm sure she'd love some company."

Tom watched her wander around the house, listened as she sang lullabies, and waited for her to finish mothering her dolls. After several restless nights, he was awoken by the faint sound of whispering. He sat up in the bed and saw Kate's reflection in the mirror. She was standing by the empty cradle whispering to the air. He walked over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, "You must stop this, Kate. We can have other children." She stared at him in silence until he shuddered and turned away.

The only person who had any effect was the mammy Kate had chosen for her son. The mammy would stay with Kate all day and late into the evening pulling her away from the porch railing, stopping her from extinguishing candles with her hand, coaxing her to eat. When Tom began to sleep in another room across the hall, the mammy began sleeping on a cot at the foot of the bed, as if Kate were an infant. Finally, Tom left to do business in New Orleans and took Mazy with him, insisting that he needed her assistance with preparations because she knew best what Kate would choose if she were clear-minded enough to make choices. Only a few months after the death of her first born child, Kate was left to wander in the maze of her mind alone.

She occasionally heard voices, she sometimes saw the slaves as they passed through the halls, and from time to time she saw shadows in the mirrors behind the veils. When it was especially quiet, she had the distinct feeling that someone was watching her. Soon, she saw shadows darting into corners, and she heard voices following her through every room. Terrified of the sound of her own voice, Kate would ask for nothing. Instead, she would hide in her wardrobe and quietly groan when she thought someone was speaking.

Eventually, she recognized the loving arms and kind voice of the mammy who would sing to Kate and brush her hair. She would change Kate's clothes and gently lower her into the bath and whisper Kate's name over and over to remind her of who she was. Months passed before Kate found herself again and allowed the signs of mourning to be put away, but she wouldn't allow herself to be alone.

When Tom returned from his business in the city, Kate was restored to the fresh young girl he'd married. "All you needed was time," he said, and it was never mentioned again.

Two years had passed since Kate was last alone. This time, instead of feeling abandoned, she found that she was at peace. She slowly pulled herself to her elbows and looked around the room. Blankets had been piled in thick layers at the foot of the bed, and the long glass door that led to the gallery was slightly ajar so the sick air could escape the room. She wanted to put a ribbon in her hair and change out of her nightgown, which was damp with sweat, so that when Tom came to see her she would look like the fresh sixteen year old he'd married. As she placed a foot on the floor, she worried that she might not be strong enough to cross the room. She used the bed post for support as she slipped her feet into the house shoes lying beside her bed, but she found that she was surprisingly strong as she walked to the chiffarobe on the far side of the room.

The drawer opened easily, and the nightgown smelled of lavender as she slid it over her head. The white muslin was crisp and new, like the dresses she put on her dolls when she was a child. She walked to the dressing table, taking confidence in her assured steps, and carefully sat

on the tufted stool. She dipped a cloth in the water basin and wiped her face and neck; then she combed her hair and wrapped her head with a long strand of pink ribbon so that the bow was on her temple as if her thoughts were a gift. In the reflection of the glass, she watched as Mazy quietly entered holding a bundle of blankets in her arms. Kate smiled and turned around to accept her present, but the room was empty.

“Mazy?” She was startled by the sound of her voice. It sounded hollow and far away. She turned back to the mirror and saw Mazy’s arms opening the cloth behind her. It wasn’t the soft quilt she’d made for the baby; it was the black lace they’d used to cover the mirrors when the first child died.

“Oh, Mazy. No, please. Not again!” Kate wailed and buried her face in her hands as she turned away from the mirror. She reached her arms out, hoping to wrap them around Mazy’s waist, but again Kate found herself alone. Tearful and afraid, she ran into the hall looking for someone to reassure her that she hadn’t lost her mind. The air was still and stifling, so all the windows and doors were open. She ran into every room, down the hall, onto the gallery, and saw no one. Even in the yard and in the fields and around the slave quarters, not a soul could be seen. Lightheaded and overcome by fear, Kate fell to her knees and wailed. The clock in the hall struck the hour, the bell in the field rang out, and somewhere in the house a glass shattered as it fell to the floor.

Startled by the sounds the house made in her grief, she ran back into the hall hoping to find someone. The mirror at the end of the hall was covered in a thick black blanket. She ran past it to the foot of the stairs. Thinking she could hear voices, she strained to determine the direction of the sounds. The parlor was empty, the library was empty, the dining room was empty, and

Tom's office was empty. Kate ran to the kitchen house thinking that, surely, someone would be there. It too was empty. There wasn't even a fire in the stove.

Again, she thought she heard someone talking. It was far away, but the voice was familiar. Still, Kate saw no one. *I've lost myself again*, she thought as tears streamed down her face. Defeated, she walked back into the house dragging her slippers. She plodded through the hall toward the stairs leaving broken blades of grass and little clods of dirt behind her.

When Kate reached the landing of the staircase, she looked at the face of the grandfather clock she had brought with her when she married Tom. The clock was stopped, and the glass from the casing was lying in shards on the floor in front of her. Someone would have to clean it up soon. She stood by the clock and ran her fingers along the chains and fobs and tried to calm herself with the assurance that, soon, someone would come and she would no longer be alone, but the voices that whispered all around her frightened her and she wanted to hide.

Hopeful that she could attract attention to herself and also hide from the voices, she picked up a sliver of glass and pressed it into the wallpaper that lined the hall. She cut a long streak down the hall to the door of her bedroom hoping it would attract enough attention that someone would come looking for her. At the end of the hall, it occurred to her that her hand would be cut, and she dropped the shard on the floor to examine her palm.

There was no mark, no broken skin, not even a pinprick of blood. She inspected the wallpaper and could see the tiny fibers where the paper had torn. The glass on the floor was evidence that she had not imagined it. Kate walked into her bedroom and went straight to the basin on her dressing table. She dipped her hands in the water and could feel that it was refreshingly cool. She could see her shadow in the reflection, but the water remained clear. No tiny traces of blood had gone undetected.

Kate looked in the mirror again to wipe away the stains undoubtedly left on her cheeks by the tears she had been crying. There, in the reflection, she could see her husband on the far side of the room beside her bed. He seemed distraught. He was wringing his hands. He knelt by her bed, hands clasped, and his mouth moved as though he were speaking. She noticed a bulge under the blankets, like someone were hiding under the covers asleep.

She stopped breathing and slowly turned around to look at Tom and discovered that she was still alone. A moment later, she could hear people talking in low voices, but she couldn't understand any of the words. Still, she could see no one in the room, but this time she looked in the mirror and there she saw Tom speaking to the doctor. The two men gestured to the bed, Tom rubbed his forehead, and the doctor put his hand on Tom's shoulder. In a moment, Mazy walked into the room with more black cloth and made her way to the dressing table with a black lace veil. She didn't even look in the mirror before covering the glass with the shroud. The veil looked like a heavy curtain hanging over a window, and Kate tried to lift it so she could see what Tom and the doctor were talking about. All she could feel was the glass.

She wiped it again and heard her skin squeak against the surface. A faint handprint appeared, smudged and small, but she still could not lift the veil. She walked over to the bed and saw no bulge, no lumps, nothing that looked as though another person's body was hidden away. Then she flung herself against the pillows and cried herself to sleep.

The sound of clattering awoke her. She watched shadows through the lace on the mirror and saw a body being lifted from her bed. It was dressed in white and had a ribbon tied around its head, and it was placed into an opulently padded coffin. Frightened, Kate hid in her chiffarobe, praying again and again, "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide."

Eventually, she heard a baby crying somewhere in the house and carefully came out of hiding to see if she could find its source. Following the sound into the nursery, she found that the small glass chimes hanging above the cradle showed glimpses of her healthy baby girl. When she walked over to the cradle, the crying stopped. She reached in and saw only blankets. They were warm, and when she stroked them, she heard the contented coo of a newborn infant. In the tiny chimes, she watched the baby sleep. The mammy hummed around the room and Kate, again, felt at peace.

After several hours of resting in the peace of the nursery, Kate felt strong enough to venture downstairs. The windows in the parlor were closed and shrouded, the coffin lay open surrounded by candles, and Kate could smell incense burning. The reflection of the flickering lights could be seen through the lace on the mirror that hung above the coffin and Kate found herself mesmerized by the way the shadows bounced behind the veil. She was able to hear whispering and moved closer to the mirror to see if she could find the reflection of the source of the sound. A priest stood at the head of the casket, quietly whispering. He took out a small bottle and poured some water into a little gold bowl. Then he sprinkled the water across the body in the casket and Kate felt the water drop on her head and face. She looked down and saw tiny spots of water on her nightdress.

Faced with the final realization that it was her funeral the priest was preparing, Kate tearfully whispered her confession through the veil covered mirror. "Forgive me Father for I have sinned. I ... have. I know I have. And I pray that God will forgive me, Father. Please, ask Him to forgive me and take away this curse. I'm... I must be an abomination. A spirit, a ghost. I don't know what I've done to deserve this punishment, but please, Father, please beg my forgiveness!"

She hid in a corner of the room near the casket and waited, muttering the act of contrition and begging the Mother Mary for her intercession until she fell asleep. When she awoke, the room was still dark and she didn't know how much time had passed, but she suddenly realized that the casket was no longer in the room. If not for the black curtains and veils, she would have thought it was all a horrible dream.

It wasn't until the black veils had been taken off the mirrors that Kate walked to the large oak tree where her first child had been buried. The freshly turned earth, and the small white cross, confirmed that she was truly and eternally alone.

Hoping that her penitence and confession were enough to earn God's forgiveness, Kate wandered through the house waiting for the angels to escort her to Heaven. She climbed onto the roof through the third floor window and up to the widows walk that surrounded the chimneys, and she waited. The sun set, the moon rose, the dawn came, but no angels appeared. She waited another day and night and still was alone. She prayed to her guardian angel, the Mother Mary, and every saint she could name and still had no answer. Finally, she remembered her rosary beads hidden away somewhere in her room.

In her search for the beads, she watched the comings and goings of her family. The baby was healthy and well tended under mammy's care. Mazy kept fresh flowers by Kate's bed. Tom wore mourning. Occasionally, Kate could hear a startled gasp, and she thought someone had caught a glimpse of her as they passed by a window or mirror.

She remembered the stories from her childhood, whispered to her by the sons and daughters of the slaves who practiced voodoo. If a soul, recently separated from its body saw itself in the mirror on its way to the afterlife it would become confused and wander into the mirror instead of into Heaven. That, she was told, was the reason mirrors were covered, so the

soul would more easily find its way out of the house where the angels would meet it and take it up to Heaven. It was also whispered that if a trapped soul saw a living person in the mirror, they would switch bodies. As she grew older, Kate told herself the stories were meant to frighten girls out of being vain and looking in the mirror too long, but now she worried that the tales may be true.

When she saw someone in the mirrors, she would duck into a doorway so they wouldn't see her. As much as she wanted company, she didn't want to be responsible for trapping others in this lonely world. After spending days searching every drawer and shelf, pillow and pocket for her rosary beads, she wondered if the angels may have been lingering at her grave.

Kate wandered around the tiny grave yard to look for some sign that she had not been forgotten, and soon she saw each broken branch or torn leaf as an omen that someone might be looking for her. For months, she wandered aimlessly, unsure of what might lead her to Heaven, afraid that she missed her chance to leave.

Aggrieved, Kate distracted herself by peering into the world she had left behind, hoping that she would be able to find some way to pay penance for whatever sin she'd committed which warranted this awful curse. She would stare into the mirrors, and if she strained hard enough, she could understand some of the conversations around her, and it gave her the semblance of company.

One afternoon, Kate was watching Tom go about the business of settling his books and accounts when one of the house boys came into the room to put new wood on the fire. The boy carefully scraped out the hearth and put the ashes into a bucket before putting new logs on the fire. As he was leaving, he lost his grip and the bucket tilted forward and spilled some of the ashes on the floor. He silently set the bucket down to fetch a broom. Tom hadn't noticed the boy

or the spill, and as he walked from the desk to the cabinet, he stepped in the ashes and his shoes were quickly covered. When the boy returned, Tom boxed his ears and yelled at him, demanding that his shoes be polished right away.

Kate had never liked it when Tom raised his voice in the house, and she'd never approved of hitting the slaves for anything other than defiant disobedience. While she was alive, she never said a word to Tom about these concerns. Instead, she would quietly instruct the house servants on how to avoid Tom's outbursts.

Frustrated by her inability to help the boy, she walked into the hall and saw, in the long mirror hanging in the entrance, Mazy carrying a watering can into the front parlor. "Mazy, I need you." Kate was startled at the sound of her voice. She had no idea how long she had gone without speaking. Expecting her efforts to be completely ineffectual, Kate was further startled when Mazy turned around and looked in the mirror.

A rush of hope filled Kate, and she dashed into Tom's office, trying to direct Mazy to follow her. From the tiny mirror that Tom occasionally used to straighten his ties before meeting with various town merchants, Kate watched Mazy calmly wait for Tom to finish scolding the boy. She skillfully helped him clean the mess and directed him to fetch a clean pair of shoes for Master Tom so that the soiled shoes could be polished. When that had been done, she asked if Tom needed anything else.

He waved the boy out of the room and closed the door. Tom combed his fingers through his hair and crumpled receipts from his desk. Mazy nodded. He grabbed her waist, kissed her neck and tugged at her shirtwaist as if he'd been to these places before. Kate held her breath, trying to calm her pain and anger, and she looked away but could still hear Mazy moan.

Kate left the room, saw the watering can on the hall table and ran at it with such force that she knocked it over. The water spilled onto the Persian carpet and marble floor. She walked through the puddle to the staircase. As she reached the landing, she looked down on the puddle of water and noticed that she had left footprints on the carpet. She picked up a poking iron from the fireplace in Tom's room and considered smashing the mirror with it, but stopped when she realized she'd be losing one of the few windows she had into her past life. Instead, she broke every pane of glass in the windows of his room.

She wondered what other traces of herself she could leave behind.

Over the next few days, she left notes for her husband: "Scoundrel" and "How could you?" Each note appeared garbled. She had no trouble holding the pen and dipping it into ink, but leaving the marks on paper was exhausting and each letter looked as if a child had been scribbling. Tom, confused by the messages, threw the papers into the fire.

The messages Kate left for Mazy were more noticeable. First, she pulled the feathers out of one of her pillows, but Mazy blamed it on one of the younger house girls. Then, Kate opened all the doors and cabinets. Mazy never saw it, because one of the house boys closed them all. Kate took dirt out of the house plants and sprinkled it all over the library floor, she closed all the drapes in the middle of the day, she overturned mop buckets and spilled the contents of dust pans – anything she could think of to make Mazy's job more difficult. All her efforts were wasted because the house slaves corrected the problems before Mazy discovered them. Kate had managed to frighten almost everyone in the house but Mazy and Tom.

Whisperings of a ghost started to circulate, and some of the house slaves started carrying salt with them to sprinkle everywhere they went. Kate never had much tolerance for the superstitions of her slaves, but she knew the evidence of fear when she saw it. The line of salt

sprinkled at every door and the curly feathered chickens left pecking near the steps were a result of her presence. Mazy would clear them away and fuss at the lower members of the house for being so foolish as to believe in ghosts. Then, she would dust Kate's room and replace the flowers in the vase by the bed and sing songs to the baby.

Powerless to change the situation, Kate tried to comfort herself by watching her daughter who seemed able to see her. When Kate entered the room, she could hear her daughter laugh. When Kate looked in the mirror, the baby would look directly at her. She had to be careful to look away and not make eye contact for fear the baby might be hypnotized by her gaze. The little girl's pale blue eyes and pink cheeked grin were beautiful. It was difficult for Kate to be in the room with her daughter and not watch her every move. Eventually, it hurt too much not to look at the baby, so Kate would only go in the room when the little girl slept.

Tom would often visit the nursery to check on his charge and it gave Kate the warm feeling that they were still a family. By the time the little girl started talking, she no longer laughed when Kate walked into the room. Instead, the baby was frightened by Kate's reflection in the mirror, so Kate stopped visiting.

Tom turned to Mazy for comfort when he thought no one was looking and soon had established a routine so familiar that the entire household knew about their liaisons. Kate stayed in her own room most of the time and wandered through the garden on nights when the house was filled with Mazy's moaning.

One afternoon, Kate discovered a small wreath of white flowers on her grave. A note was attached with a pink bow. "I will never forget you." It wasn't signed, but it had clearly been written by Tom. The curiousness of the note baffled Kate. She had borne him two children, they

had known one another for most of their lives; surely there was no danger of her being forgotten by him.

A few days later, trunks of clothing appeared in Kate's bedroom. They were bright and gaudy things that she would never have worn. All of her belongings had been removed from the dressing table. Even the linens were different. Only the furniture and vases remained in place, but they were no longer full of the fragrant roses and lilies she had always liked. Instead, the vases were filled with daisies and babies' breath. While rummaging through these strange possessions, Kate heard the giggling of a little girl. She looked up into the dressing table mirror and saw blonde ringlets piled high on the head of a young woman.

The woman was holding Kate's corset, giggling and sashaying around the room. She went closer to the dressing table, and Kate could see that this wasn't another woman at all. It was a child. She couldn't possibly have been more than fifteen. Then Kate saw the ring on the girl's left hand. It was the same one Tom had once given her. Mazy was standing in the corner of the room, silent, and downcast. Kate's daughter, now a toddler, waddled into the room and pulled some ribbons from the trunk. The child bride smacked the toddler's fingers and then turned to the mammy to scold her for letting the little girl out of her nursery. Her shrill voice caused a ringing in Kate's ears.

Outraged at being replaced by an empty headed overgrown doll who had no respect for Kate's memory or child, Kate knocked the vases off the tables one by one and watched with satisfaction as they fell to the floor and shattered. The blonde girl screamed and cried out for help. When the last vase fell to the floor, Kate walked around the room carefully stepping through every puddle of water to be certain she left footprints on the carpets. Then, she ran down

the stairs to Tom's office without even bothering to look in the mirror to see if he was in the room.

First, she pulled all the books from the shelves and let them land on the floor. Then, she pulled all the papers out of his desk drawers and threw them in the air. Finally, she emptied all the pots of ink into the inkwell until it was overflowing, and the ink ran into the grains of wood on the desk. With her finger, she used the ink to write "No" across the width of the desk. She smiled when she heard the blonde girl crying somewhere in the house.

Over the next few days, Kate found the dolls that had been hidden away after her first child died. She took them, one by one, and placed them around her bedroom. At first, the blonde girl thought they were gifts from Tom, meant to amuse her and comfort her. Then Kate moved one every time the grandfather clock struck the hour. The girl would cry out for Tom when she noticed one had moved. After a week, the doctor was called to examine the blonde girl. He left tonics and powders, and the girl spent days drifting in and out of sleep.

When Kate saw Tom kneeling by the girl's bed, praying, she grabbed one of the dolls off of the bed and pushed over the stool in front of the dressing table. Tom walked over to set the chair upright and looked into the mirror. There, he saw Kate smiling, holding the doll in her hand. She raised the doll up and smashed its head against the table just before she pushed the mirror over and it fell to the floor, shattering into tiny shards. When he looked around the room, he realized he was all alone.

Relations

It is a cool autumn day, perfect for wearing your new wingtip loafers, camel trench coat, and your father's fedora. As you step out of your house, inhale the crisp air before turning right onto Third Street. Mrs. Bridgestocke will teeter out of her house to get the morning paper. No doubt she wishes she were younger, so she could ask you to follow her back into her home. Tip your hat to her. It'll make her feel good and remind her of being young.

When you reach St. Charles Avenue, stop at the corner to wait for the streetcar. People might pass you. Be sure to look at your watch, so they'll know you have someplace important to be. You could walk to the next stop, since it's only a few blocks, and continue to enjoy the pleasant morning air before it becomes humid. Maybe stop at the cemetery to pay your respects to your mother along the way. When you feel the leather of your new shoes pinch your feet, decide to wait for the streetcar here instead.

There's a pretty olive-skinned woman approaching. She's holding the hand of a little boy in a school uniform. Smile and straighten your coat. Greet her by tipping your hat, the way your father would have, but wait for her to finish scolding the blond haired boy for fidgeting with the buttons on his blazer. When the boy sticks out his tongue and says, "You're not the boss of me," try not to smirk.

When the woman bends over to tie the little boy's shoes, watch her ponytail slide beneath her blouse along her collar bone. Shift your weight slightly so that you're leaning toward her, but not so much that she'll notice. After you've caught a glimpse of the top of her breasts, be sure to look away quickly so she won't notice where you've been staring. Smile at her when she stands

back up, so that she'll know you're in this thing together – waiting for the streetcar, listening to the boy whine, "I want ice cream."

Say, "It's a beautiful day," and gesture to the clear blue sky to prove the truth of your statement. "Ice cream would be a nice treat to look forward to."

When the woman tells the boy he must be good at school if he wants ice cream later, say "I'd be willing to be good all day if it meant I could have ice cream."

The little boy will look up at you as he considers the idea. He will be impressed by your wisdom and admire you for sharing it. Don't be fooled when he sticks out his lower lip, crosses his arms, and says, "When I grow up I'll have ice cream whenever I want. Even when I'm bad."

He's testing your understanding of the world. Prove that you know what you're talking about. Say, "Ice cream is no good without a pretty lady to share it with. Can't have that if you're bad. No one wants to be around you when you're bad." Shake your head as though the very idea of a life devoid of a pretty lady is the saddest you can think of.

When the young woman clears her throat, and says "C'mon. We're running late. We'll get a cab," do not offer to share it with her. She may want you to, but you have more important things to do today.

As the sound of the streetcar approaches, take out your pass from your calfskin wallet to show the driver. The streetcar is a charming way to travel and reminds you of your youth. If the streetcar is full, you may have to stand. Remember, it's part of the experience.

When you notice the man with the least baggage, politely move to his section of the car to save your shoes from being scuffed by briefcases and purses. Smile politely when he looks up from his paper to acknowledge your presence. Nod and look away.

Watch through the windows as you pass the rows of houses and the shops that still haven't opened. Remember the first time you took this trip with your father. It was your birthday, and your father decided it was time for you to become a man. Your parents had argued about whether or not you should go, but your father finally won on the basis that you might not always have a driver available to you. At some point, you'd need to navigate the city on your own. Your father loaned you his fedora, which was too large for your head, and he gave you a new pair of cuff links for the occasion. You gave up your seat for some pretty girls, coeds at one of the local universities, and your father lied to them and told them it was your nineteenth birthday instead of your fifteenth. He chatted with them until you all stepped out onto Canal Street and they hurried away through the crowd. It embarrassed you that your father was talking you up to girls, but you were pleased that he thought they should be interested in you.

Don't reminisce too long. Be present in the moment. Pay attention to your surroundings. Soak it in. The man sitting across from you, reading the paper, keeps checking his watch and shaking his leg. When he notices you looking at him, and holds the paper even higher to hide his face, notice the pale line of skin on his left ring finger. The next time he looks at his watch, be prepared to say something.

"Lots of pretty ladies downtown. Easy to be distracted. But, there's nothing quite like having someone to come home to. Keeps you from feeling alone in the world." Shake your head as if the very idea of an empty house is a reason to mourn.

Do not be surprised when he looks at you nervously. He might think you're a private investigator who's been hired to tail him and report back to his wife. Let him think this. It might make him reconsider the liaison he's obviously late for. When the man hurriedly folds up the paper and wedges it between the seat cushions next to him, prepare for him to make a quick dash

off the streetcar. Back up to give him as much room as you can and claim his seat as soon as he vacates it. Watch him from the window as he greets a young blonde with a kiss on the cheek. When he looks back at you, touch the brim of your fedora and smile.

Open the paper, skim the headlines, find the obituaries. Look for the article you requested a few days ago. It's short and blunt, like your father. Try not to wonder whether or not he would have liked it. He wouldn't have. Resign yourself to this. Check your watch before you step out of the streetcar. You're still a little early. You'll probably have to wait.

Walk past the beignet shop and across the square to a red brick building and press the buzzer for the door hidden between a restaurant and a hat shop. Wait for the door to click, and walk up the flight of stairs which leads to the private residences above the square. At the end of the hall, the apartment door will be opened by a little girl. Today, she is in a party dress and plastic tiara.

Tug at the brim of your hat and wink as you say, "Hello, princess. Is your *mamere* here?"

Unimpressed, she will roll her eyes. "Yes. She said you have to wait on the balcony until she's ready." She will open the door wider and step aside to let you in.

Pat her curly blonde hair as you step through the door. Comfort yourself in the familiarity of your surroundings. The plush carpet, the green sofa, the smell of lavender. Remember how your father complained about the scent when he first brought you here. Hang your hat and coat on the hooks in the foyer. Notice the dark tweed coat and brown derby hat already hanging there. Resist the temptation to ask about their owner.

"Ahem," Cecelia will say as she taps her plastic shoe impatiently on the wooden floor.

Indulge her impatience. "It's a lovely day, don't you think Cecelia? You're lucky you can enjoy it. When do you start to school?"

“Next year, if mommy can get me in the right school. She knows the big boss there and he says I can go, but mommy says, ‘We’ll see.’”

“Well, that’s nice. I bet you’ll really like school. You’re a smart girl, just like your mommy.” Enjoy this innocent conversation. One day, your dealings with her will be more professional.

“Mamere says I’m as smart as mommy, but I’m prettier. Mommy has freckles and I don’t.” Cecilia will point to her narrow nose as proof.

Even though you like her mother’s freckles, don’t say so. Cecilia will think you’re contradicting her mamere. Instead, say “Well, your mother is a beautiful woman. But your mamere was a Miss Belle Chasse, so she knows what she’s talking about.”

Cecilia will say, “You have to stay on the balcony until she comes to get you. I have to play hide-and-seek now.”

Let yourself onto the balcony through the sliding door. There are plants on the railing to obscure Ophelia’s clients from the street below as they lounge at the small table and chairs. Sit down and watch the passersby in the square. The painters will lace the iron gates with their canvases. The street performers will stake out suitable space for their soapboxes. Music will play somewhere and echo through the square. Sugar will billow from the beignet shop every time the wind blows. Appreciate the predictability of these events.

When you smell the cigarette smoke of someone on the gallery below, remember how Sophia taught you to smoke and roll your own cigarettes the day you became a man. Smile at the thought of her freckled nose twitching when she blew smoke rings. Pull out your cigarette case from your suit pocket and check your hair in the reflection of the silver box. Remember that it is the patina which makes your blue eyes look distorted, and it is the “J” in “For Jean, From Linda”

that cuts your eye in half. The engraving on the little box, which was a wedding gift from your bride, has begun to wear away. Do not be bothered by this. Not today. Remember to live in the moment. Open the case and tap one of the small rolls of paper before lighting it up and taking a drag.

Ophelia will say, “I thought you were quitting,” when she comes to get you.

Lie. Say, “I am. I smelled a cigarette, and I just, forgot.”

Ophelia is only asking because of your father’s lung cancer. When she says, “I wasn’t sure if you were coming. I mean, with the funeral and all,” resist the urge to ask her to join you. Do not allow yourself to hope that she will come.

Instead say, “We have an appointment don’t we?” Look at your watch. “I have a few hours, and I’m not anxious to get there.”

Ophelia will look at you sympathetically, and ask, “Would you like coffee and beignets? We can play cards.”

Appreciate the fact that she recognizes your need for calm and routine. “That would be nice. It’s a beautiful morning, but do you think we could go inside? The smell of the cigarette. I’m trying to be good.”

Ophelia’s smile is warm and sympathetic, and the skin around her eyes crinkles a little when she says, “Come on in. I’ll get you a cup.”

Find the cards in the drawer and shuffle the deck, then prop your feet on the ottoman, so Ophelia will notice your shoes. Ask about Sophia and Cecelia, sip your coffee, treat this like a normal day. Play cards until Ophelia announces, “Rummy.” When she asks if you want to play another round, shake your head. Lean across the ottoman and brush away a strand of hair from her face. Try not to remember the argument you had with your father when he realized that

Ophelia had been passing herself off as white. Instead, remember the way she comforted you when your mother left.

When you ask, “What shall we do now?” Ophelia will answer, “We can do what you like. It’s your time.”

Enjoy your time. Be at peace. Live in the moment.

In an hour and a half, after you’ve showered and dressed, walk quietly down the hall. Don’t interrupt the conversation in the foyer; Ophelia likes to maintain an air of anonymity for her clients. Respect this rule. Listen carefully for the conversation to be over.

Listen to the strained voice of an old man say, “Your daughter will be a wonderful addition to our school, Sophia. We’ll be happy to have her join in the fall. We’re always looking for volunteers with afterschool activities, if you’re interested.”

Watch as Sophia helps the old man into his tweed coat and says, “I’ll have to check my calendar to see what afternoons will be free.”

“I’ll see you on our parent night won’t I?”

“Of course. I’ve got the whole evening reserved just for you.”

Try not to make a sound when the old man grunts and wheezes as he says, “Good. I’ve had more fun in the last three hours with you than I’ve had in all thirty years with the missus.”

Wait for the door to shut before saying, “Sophia? Is that you?”

Notice that her caramel colored curls are nearly perfect, though her face is flushed. Do not ask when she last saw your father. Do not tell her that he insisted she wasn’t related to Ophelia. Do not ask if she will be at the funeral. Hug her. Remember the hour when she turned you into a man. Think about the little mole just below her hip and the pattern of freckles on her

collar bone. Be in the moment. Appreciate that after twenty years there is a firmness to her breasts, a gentle curve of her waist.

Ask, “Are you reading any good books? I’d love to catch up. Do you have any appointments available?”

When she says, “I’ve got an hour Thursday morning and two hours Sunday afternoon. Which would you like?” pretend that you didn’t already know her Sunday afternoons would be available.

Instead say, “Hmmm. I’ve already got an appointment with your mom on Sunday morning, so Sunday afternoon would be perfect. Maybe we can all get lunch together.”

Do not be offended when Sophia says, “I think we both have lunch appointments already. You know how people are after church.”

Instead suggest, “Maybe just ice cream then.”

Sophia will look over your shoulder and ask Ophelia, “What do you think mom?”

Be content when Ophelia says, “We’ll plan on it. You be good ‘till then.” After she helps you on with your coat, hand her a roll of money. After Cecelia hands you your hat, give her some chocolate coins. Thank her. Tell her she’ll be a good hostess someday. As you leave, remind yourself that Sunday is only a few days away. Until then, try to live in the moment.

Cross the square to the front door of the church. Pass the holy water, forget to genuflect, walk to the front pew and sit down. Tap your foot on the marble tile, tug at the buttons on your coat, look around. You are alone. Be at peace with this.

Notice the candles flickering at the feet of the statue of Mary. Walk over to them. Count them. Use a match stick to light one of the candles and try to remember the Hail Mary. Smile at

the irony of asking a virgin to look after your father's soul. Change your mind. Ask her nothing. Blow out the candle.

When the priest walks in, realize that the strange look he's giving you is a result of you still having your hat on. Remove your hat and coat, place them on the pew, stand with your hands folded in front of you. Wait.

Say, "Might as well begin Father."

When he asks, "How long do you want to wait for your guests," do not be surprised. Remember that he did not know your father.

Tell him, "It's just me Father. He wasn't a good man. The only people he had in his life are people he paid to be there."

When the priest says, "He was your father. Are you sure you don't want a Mass?" realize that he's thinking your father was a good Catholic.

After you say, "What's the point Father? We're not kidding anyone. The old man wanted his funeral here, he didn't say what kind. If he'd ever gone to confession, he'd have been here for days. He didn't care about being good, just the appearance of being good." remember that it's bad form to speak ill of the dead. Say, "Forgive me. I wasn't thinking."

"I think he would have wanted a mass just the same." The priest will seem bewildered, so relent.

"We can do what you like. It's your time."

Watch the priest disappear through a door and return in a black cope, followed by the coffin on a low cart that's been draped in red cloth. As the priest prepares the Eucharist, do not roll your eyes or rub your forehead. Wait for the priest to realize that only the altar boys will be receiving the sacrament.

As the priest steps in front of the altar, listen to the sounds of footsteps behind you and watch a boy approach with his palm outstretched, a woman in a dark blue suit behind him. Hold your breath for a moment and wait for them to pass. Wait for the priest to give the benediction before looking over your shoulder. Ignore the priest as he pauses at the threshold and clears his throat.

Wait for your ex-wife to speak first. “You need to follow the body Jean. We’ll wait for you here.”

Give the priest a donation. Shake hands with the funeral director. Nod when he says, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Tell him that you’ll collect the ashes next week. Straighten your hair. Check your breath. Wipe away the beads of sweat that have formed at your temples. Return to the sanctuary.

Say, “I’m so glad you came,” as you hold out your arms to your son.

When he holds out his hand and says, “I’m sorry for your loss,” look at Linda for an explanation.

“He’s ten, Jean. He hasn’t seen you for seven years. Cut him some slack.”

Try to act as though you remembered this. “Ten! Yes, of course. You’re too old for a hug from your old man. Put ‘er there.” Shake his hand vigorously. “How about we get some ice cream? For old times’ sake.”

When Linda says, “Honestly, Jean. He’s lactose intolerant,” do not be disappointed.

Instead say, “Right. I didn’t really plan a reception or anything. No one really liked the old geezer you know. Lived alone and died alone. Sad, really.” Pick up your coat and hat.

Hide your disappointment when Linda says, “My husband is waiting for us Jean,” and pulls your son away from you.

Resist the urge to cry. Say, “Right. Well. I’ll walk you out then.”

The air will still be crisp when your new wingtip loafers land on the walk. Fold your coat over one arm and put on your fedora. Say, “Boy-oh-boy. Ten years old. Got a girlfriend yet? No? Well, when you’re ready to become a man, I know the perfect girl for you. She’ll be just old enough I think. Sweetest little girl you’ll ever meet. Her grandmother was Miss Belle Chasse.”

Notice that your son blushes at the mention of a girlfriend. Realize that he’s probably embarrassed by the idea of you talking him up to girls, but that he’s probably proud you think girls will be interested in him. Continue to share your plans with him. “Oh, yes sir. My dad introduced me to her mother on my fifteenth birthday. I’ve spent every Sunday with her family ever since. Stick with me kid. You won’t regret it.”

When Linda pulls him away and says, “We’ve got a plane to catch, Jean. I’m really sorry for your loss,” say goodbye. Stand in front of the cathedral steps and watch them climb into a cab. Wait for them to leave. Be sorry for your loss. Walk slowly to the streetcar and wait for it to take you back to your empty home. Wait. Remind yourself that you will be comforted in only three days. Until then, try to live in the moment. Do not allow yourself to wallow in grief. Tell yourself you are nothing like your father. You will not die alone.

The Tarot Reader

Every day I have to walk past the cemetery with my small camp table and chairs. I wish I could live there, but people would think it was odd and come to ask me why, so I walk down Rampart Street, cross Bourbon, and head through Pirates' Alley to the square. I usually arrive before the bars have turned on their neon signs, while the restaurants are filling up tables and the shops are closing. I chat with the living statues as they smoke their cigarettes and leave little rings of silver paint on the stubs. I ask the street musicians if the tips have been any good and chat with them about their next gigs. I get to my spot, just as the lights of the cathedral begin to shine on the square, and set up my table between the palm reader and the clairvoyant. As they pack up their canvases for the evening, I nod to the artists who have spent the day lining the sidewalk with their craft, and I compliment their work – even when I don't mean it.

The camp table is small and easy to miss, so I pull a clear plastic globe out of my bag and place it next to the giant tarot cards on the corner of the table before I put on my rings and bracelets and hoop earrings. The tourists like these details—it all seems authentic to them—but they're too gaudy to wear all day. The tourists come down to the square off the Riverwalk and out of the beignet shop; some look in the shop windows, others stop at the corner to surround one of the living statues and have their photos taken. They tip him and smile and ask for one more. I sit down and watch the people as they pass. I see the auras, the emotions, the hopes, the dreams, and I wait. I cringe, hoping they won't come, hoping they won't need me, but sooner or later, they find me.

Today, a priest crosses the square to the cathedral. I've never seen him before. He's young and pale skinned. He nearly trips over himself when he notices the line of readers outside the gate. Clearly, this is his first visit to New Orleans. He stares at us like we're demons or

something. We aren't that different, really. We both listen to confessions and try to provide comfort in our own way, but I'm sure he doesn't see it that way.

I can hear him say, "Oh, dear God. What is this world coming to?" as he passes. It's something I've wondered many times myself. I've always had what my mother called "a gift" for knowing how other people feel, but over the years the gift has run away with me, showing me their memories and leaving me with the source of their guilt. When I was a child, the worst thing anyone felt guilty about was using bad words or stealing a pack of gum. Now, it's so much worse.

It would be a relief if I could go to confession and tell someone everything I've seen. To unburden myself of the young girl who tried to starve herself to death because her mother called her a fat-good-for-nothing and the pregnant woman who wanted advice on who to raise her child with— her husband or her lover. But, I've never felt like I belonged in a church. I guess I'm not the only one, otherwise people wouldn't need to seek me out.

I watch the priest as he crosses the square. There are some Hindus that sometimes walk around the square trying to collect donations. They have a whole shtick where they stop you and say, "Excuse me. I'm with the fun police, and you my friend aren't having enough fun. I'm going to have to write you a ticket." Then they go into a whole bit about how they're raising money for this meals-on-wheels thing they've got going on, and they give you a hat and a little vegetarian cookbook for donating. It's a really good thing they're doing, but it's kind of annoying when you're in a rush.

One of the Hindus tries to stop the priest on his way over to the church. The guy blows a whistle and makes a big deal and the priest gets all flustered because he's not sure if this is an undercover cop or some kind of hidden camera show. When he realizes what's going on, he

throws his hands up and gets really loud, “I’m a priest. What makes you think I’ve got any money?” Then he clomps up the steps and into the opulent cathedral where all the rich Catholics in the city go to church.

It’s beautiful. Don’t get me wrong. It seems like a peaceful place, and I like the idea of a place to find peace – it’s why I like graveyards – but, at a church people take their worries to candles and take comfort from the icons and find guidance from their Bibles. They seek out priests to find forgiveness and blessing. I can’t offer that kind of comfort. I can’t even find it for myself. The best I can do is try to help them find closure, to let go of their guilt. The cards used to help me figure out what to say, but now I feel as lost as the fool on a pilgrimage to nowhere.

During the last hours of daylight, only tourists stop at my table. Most of them want to have their photo taken and say they want their fortunes read. Some of them think I’m a Gypsy because of my clothes and my dark complexion. I smile. I don’t contradict them. It doesn’t matter. They’re confused. They don’t know what Gypsies are or what a reading is; they think it’s all a parlor trick. They only want to be told what they want to hear—that they’ll be happy, that they’ll find true love, that their mothers loved them best. Whatever it is that they want to hear, I know before they even sit down. I don’t tell them that I know about their eating disorders and their suicidal thoughts. I don’t tell them that I know they think they can’t be loved. Instead, I tell them the things I think will give them hope, and I hope it works.

By dusk, it’s the gamblers who stop. They want to know the right numbers or the right games to play. They want to know how much to bet and where to buy their next lottery tickets. I tell them it doesn’t work that way. If I knew those things, I’d be rich and at home, not sitting in this crappy chair in the sweltering heat. They all say the same thing: “If you’re a psychic, shouldn’t you be able to see the future?” I sigh. Maybe some people can see the future. Maybe

Donald Trump isn't lucky, maybe he's a soothsayer. I don't have that particular gift. Sorry.

Then, they demand a refund. Cheap bastards.

After dark, anything goes. Drunk frat boys sit down to ask if they'll get lucky. "If you play your cards right," I tell them, holding up my Tarot cards. They usually like that joke. The ghost and vampire tours walk past my table, wearing their proof of payment – strands of Mardi Gras beads blessed by a Voodoo priestess. The tour guides never tell them that little tidbit until the end of the tour. I'm not sure if they think it adds authenticity to the experience, like an eerie little cherry on the top, or they're just worried the more religious tourists won't pay them. Either way, by the end of the tour, one of them will always stop by table to talk about their dead loved one.

I hated to see the disappointment in their faces when I told them that the dead are dead, and we can't speak to them anymore. Now, I tell them that their loved ones must be at peace because I can't see or hear them. It used to be that people worried about paying the bills or finding a spouse. Occasionally they came with a significant other hoping to get marriage advice. I hate doing that sort of thing. I mean, I can't even figure out who I'm supposed to marry, how can I possibly do that for someone else? If it's not obvious to you, maybe you don't need me. Maybe you just need to call it quits and move on.

One woman in her mid-thirties brings the man she's been seeing for several months. He's a little younger than her and a little overweight. The sort of man who probably thinks he has to take what he can get. The whole time she is sitting there talking to me, he stands behind her with a hand on her shoulder and nods and smiles at all the right moments, like he's so supportive. He seems devoted and sweet, but it's all a façade. At one point I lean over to place down a card and when I glance up, I see that he's staring straight down my blouse. He isn't subtle about it at all. I

straighten my shirt, thinking he'll be embarrassed and look away, but instead he just stares at my chest a little longer, and then he starts looking around the square. I realize he's watching every woman in the park, no doubt wondering if he can get someone younger and prettier than the woman he is with. Jerk.

I tell the woman, "I see happiness in your future," and she looks up at him beaming.

"Do you hear that honey? We'll probably be together forever."

He smiles at her, but when she turns back to face me, his face goes pale. Serves him right. I just hope she doesn't take me too seriously and stay saddled to that creep too long. I guess I could have told her the truth, that it's a dead-end relationship. But, then he'd just find someone else to leach off of. At least this way his pride will be wounded a little longer, being stuck with someone he thinks isn't good enough.

I don't do palm readings anymore because sometimes they bring up difficult memories for the people receiving the readings. Some of the memories are so strong, they are shared with me. Last year, one man came for a reading because he wanted to know if he should marry his girlfriend. I looked for a marriage line but the light was faint, so I pulled his hand a little closer.

"I see a marriage line here. It indicates that you'll be married later in life." I pointed to it with my finger.

"And children?"

As he asked the question, he thought of a recent argument he'd had with his girlfriend.

"I can't do that! I'm Catholic." She was yelling at him. Her micro-braids were bouncing around her face as she shook her head.

"What do you mean you're Catholic? I've never heard you say you're Catholic."

"I go to St. Peter Claver every Sunday morning. You know that."

“I thought you were doing that to make your mom happy.” He shrugged.

“Why do you think I wouldn’t let you use a condom?” The veins in her neck were popping.

“I just thought you didn’t like the way they feel.” He was stunned. “Look. I don’t see how you can be so self-righteous about this. We’ve always said that we weren’t ready for kids. You can’t be that Catholic. You’ve been sleeping with me for over a year now, and we’ve never even talked about marriage.”

She snorted and crossed her arms.

“It was just a suggestion. Okay? It’s an option. Okay?” He held his hands up, like someone had a gun pointed at him.

She squinted at him. “Do you have any idea what you’re asking me to do?”

“Yeah. It’s a simple procedure. Look, I’ve got the pamphlet right here. It’s outpatient. You’re in and out in no time.” He handed the pamphlet to her. “I told you I’d make sure you were taken care of, didn’t I? I’ll pay for it, I’ll drive you there, and I’ll take you home. I’ll even stay with you the whole night.”

She stared at him, like she was trying to burn a hole straight through his heart.

“You don’t have to tell your mom anything about it. I’ll take care of everything.”

“You’ll take care of everything?” she snorted again.

“I promised I would, right?”

She rolled her eyes and walked away, and that was the end of the memory. The hostile feelings were overwhelming for me, and I sat for a moment trying to catch my breath.

The guy was still sitting across from me. “Well?” He was staring at me like I’d lost my mind.

“I’m sorry. What was the question?”

“Do you see children?”

I looked again at the marriage line for signs of any children. “No. No children,” I lied. His lines clearly showed twins, and his success line was rather short. He sighed, relieved. As he walked away, I stared at the back of his head wondering if he had any idea what he was willing to walk away from. He’d find out about it all soon enough. I just hoped that when it was all said and done, he’d be happy that his girlfriend decided to go through with the pregnancy.

Tonight, a woman sits on the stool across from me.

“How can I help you tonight?”

The woman takes a deep breath. “Last month, my father was in a terrible car accident and he’s on life support. I’m his only living relative, and the doctors have just informed me that I need to decide whether or not to pull the plug.”

“Oh. I see.” I shuffle the deck and have her cut the deck. “Well, we’ll do the best we can to find you some guidance. What can you tell me about your dad?” I pull the first card. The fool.

She gasps to keep herself from crying. “He’s the one who raised me. We’re very close.”

By the time the second card is pulled, she’s in tears. It’s heartbreaking. I realize that being seen by the passers-by will embarrass her, so I place my hand on hers to offer her support. To remind her that she’s not alone in the world. She grasps my hand, desperate for a connection, and looks at me pleadingly. “What do I do?”

The question brought to her mind a memory from her childhood. She was young, maybe three or four, and she was holding her father’s hand as he led her through the halls of a nursing home. The smell of ammonia burned her lungs and made her eyes water. A woman in a

wheelchair was in the hall, drooling. The father knocked on a door which was already ajar, and she hesitated at the threshold.

“Let’s go,” he said. She didn’t look up at him. She stood, frozen by the sight of the gaunt man lying in the bed, covered by layers of paper thin blankets.

“I said, let’s go.” Her father’s voice was kind but firm, and he tugged her arm so that she had no choice.

“Daddy,” she whispered, “what do I do?”

“Just sit there and be quiet.”

She obeyed and climbed onto a recliner in the corner of the room.

“Pop. I’m here, Pop.” Her father was leaning over the rail of the bed, speaking in a low tone. The old man stared at the ceiling as his oxygen tube wheezed. “I brought Emily, Pop. You remember? You’ve been told about Emily. She’s your granddaughter. I thought you might like to meet her.”

Emily sat, quietly sucking her fingers, waiting for instructions. Her father’s thick glasses obscured most of his face, and she could not tell if he was crying, but his voice trembled as he spoke to his father.

“Pop. Did you hear me?”

“Teddy? Is that you?”

“No Pop. It’s me, Marty.” Marty reached over the railing and held his father’s translucent hand.

“Teddy. Oh, Teddy. I’m glad to see you again!” The old man lifted his free hand to Marty’s face and patted his cheek. “I’ve been waiting for you to come. They want me dead you know. Keep popping me full of pills. Draining my blood.”

“The pills are good for you, Pop. And they aren’t draining your blood, they’re cleaning it. You’ve been sick for a while. Your kidneys don’t work right.”

“What are you? Some kind of idiot? They’re trying to kill me, damn it!”

“Pop. Calm down. There’s a kid in the room.”

“What are you talking about Teddy?”

“Pop. Teddy’s not here. It’s me, Marty.”

The grandfather smacked him in the face. “Don’t ever say that name to me again.”

Marty looked over at Emily and smiled. “It’s okay sweetie. Daddy’s okay. Grandpa’s just playing a game. Pop. Look, I’ve brought your granddaughter.”

The grandfather’s head wobbled as he tried to look in the direction Marty pointed.

“Stand up sweetie, so your grandpa can see you,” Marty said, softly.

Emily obeyed, and stood on her tiptoes so she could be tall enough for her grandfather to see her over the bedrail. He strained to lift his head to look at her.

“Huh. I didn’t know you had a kid, Teddy. When did that happen?”

“Pop. I’m Marty and that’s Emily.”

“You be glad you’ve got a good daddy. You hear me little girl? He’s a good son. The kind of son that makes you proud. Best son a man could ask for.” His head plopped back on the pillow, and he reached up to pat Marty’s face. “I’m proud of you son. Having a child is a good thing. Just be sure she doesn’t end up like your brother.”

“Pop...”

“What a disappointment, to have a faggot for a son.” He pointed in Emily’s direction, his hand trembled. “Don’t you become a dyke, you hear me? You’d be better off dead than be a homo.”

“Pop!” Emily could see tears running from her father’s cheeks.

“If he wasn’t such a damned pussy, maybe his wife wouldn’t have killed herself.”

Marty let go of his father’s hand and walked calmly across the room and took Emily’s hand.

“Maybe if he hadn’t been a dick licker, she wouldn’t have gone around sleeping with other men.”

Marty led Emily to the bathroom. “Try to go potty before we leave, okay sweetie? I’ll be right back.” He pulled the door behind him, but it didn’t latch. Emily couldn’t maneuver herself onto the toilet seat because of the bars and rails in her way. So she stood in the corner, sucking on her fingers, waiting for her daddy who she could see through the crack in the door.

“Maybe if that faggot had been more of a man, she wouldn’t have come looking for you. I’ve never been so disgusted with someone in all my life. It’s no wonder God hates fags. Ruin families. Spread diseases. It’s a mercy your mother didn’t live to see it. They’re disgusting people.”

Marty said nothing. He removed the oxygen tube from his father’s nose.

“What are you doing, Teddy? Give that back.”

“It’s making noise, Pop. I think you need a new tank.” Then Marty took the pillow from behind his father’s head and placed it over the old man’s face and leaned over the bed as if to hug him. His shoulders shook, and he let out short sobbing breaths. “I love you, Daddy. I love you.”

Finally, after what felt like a very long time, he released his hug and wiped away his tears. He set the pillow back behind his father’s head and put the tube back in his nose. He walked to the bathroom and opened the door.

“Okay Emily. Ready to go?” He looked at the floor and saw the puddle that had formed around her shiny Mary Jane shoes. “Sweetie, what happened?”

“I can’t do it by myself, Daddy.” She burst into tears, terrified that he would be angry with her. He bent down to hug her, picked her up, and carried her out of the building.

“What do I do?” she asks me again. “He’s such a good man. I love him so much.”

“What would your father do?” I ask her, trying to regain my composure and not betray what I know.

Her eyes are glassy with tears, and she pulls her hand away to dry her cheeks. She looks up into the dark cloudy sky, as if hoping strength will descend upon her. She nods.

“I think you’re right,” she says, “I just don’t think I can do it by myself.” She pays me without really looking at how much she’s given me.

I wish I could help her more, but I don’t know how. The only thing more suffocating than the fear we feel in childhood is the regret and guilt we feel as adults and pulling the plug on someone you love, that’s got to leave a lot of guilt.

I watch her as she leaves, wishing I had kept my distance. I know enough from looking and listening. The sadness, the hopes, the heartaches – I feel it all. That’s how it works. I feel what everyone else feels. I can’t turn it off. I used to be able to control it, but now I feel as though I’m drowning in everyone else’s guilt and sadness. The thoughts and fears follow me everywhere I go, except the cemetery. It’s the only place where I can rest in peace and quiet. I’ve thought about ending it all, just slitting my wrists or taking a bunch of sleeping pills. But, then what? I’d be all alone. Who would these people go to if I weren’t here? How would they find comfort?

That's why I use the cards, to keep a wall between me and them. For me, it's like the thin screen in the confessional booth. Enough light to allow me insight and enough barrier to shield me from the pain.

Sometimes, I envy those priests. Well, I guess envy is a strong word. I do think they're lucky though, working inside that beautiful building with temperature control. Hiding behind a book that tells them what to say and a Pope that takes on the big problems. Secure in the feeling that they can talk to the dead and ask them for intercession.

The cathedral is most beautiful after dark. The lights shine up into the eaves so that you can see angels and carvings that are invisible by day. It's at night that I'm most tempted to wander through the massive church doors into the confessional booth. I wonder if the priests have someone to turn to with their burdens.

When I was a little girl, my grandmother would take me to the church when she went to confession. She taught me how to light a candle for people in purgatory and how to pray that their time of purging would be short. She had prayer candles at home that she kept on the mantle in front of the photo of my grandfather. One evening, while Grandma was in the confessional booth, an old priest walked up behind me and grabbed my wrist.

"What do you think you're doing?" he yelled, and he shook my arm and made me drop the match.

I was stunned. "Lighting a candle for my grandpa," I said.

"This isn't a game. It's serious." He was getting louder, the way people do when they're hard-of-hearing.

"I'm here with my grandma." I tried to speak loudly enough for him to hear me.

“Don’t you shout at me. I told you, you don’t belong here.” He pulled me by the arm to the church doors and shoved me outside. My grandmother had to get the confessor to come unlock the door for her, and she tried to get me to stop crying.

When I told my mother, she was annoyed and yelled at my grandmother, “It’s bad enough that you try to brainwash my child into believing she can do something for a dead man, now she’s being shunned? And you wonder why I don’t go to church!”

I’ve never been inside a church again. Those few minutes when I was alone in the narthex, praying for my grandpa – I remember the peace I felt. The glow of the candles was soothing somehow, and I was able to feel that perhaps I still held a connection to his spirit. It’s the same sense of peace I feel when I go to the cemetery. I wish I could find it someplace else. I wish I could find it with the living.

The street light above me starts to flicker, and a woman rushes out of the church and stumbles down the stairs. She stops at my table to look at the plastic globe. It glows in the dark to help me see the cards.

“You know how to remove curses?” she asks.

“Curses? What sort of curses?”

“You know. Voodoo things.” She keeps looking behind her, like someone is there.

“I don’t know Voodoo.”

“You’ve got to know Voodoo. You see the future right?” She starts twitching.

“What’s that got to do with Voodoo?”

“Well, you’ve got to be doing something to see the future. So, you’ve got to know something about spells and stuff.” She just stares at me, squinting. “Look. I don’t have time to

pretend that you're, you know, innocent or whatever. I've got to get rid of this curse. Can you help me or not?"

"What makes you think you're cursed?"

"Because I put one on my ex-husband, and I'm sure he's put one on me. I keep hearing things, and stuff keeps getting moved around the house." She starts pulling at her hair. "That priest – he was no help at all. I need someone who knows about these things."

"How did you put the curse on your ex? I suppose you could just do the opposite to remove the one that's on you."

"I can't," she says, and she looks at me through her hair. "He's got our daughter. He won't let me see her. He says I'm dangerous. He knows I need her to curse him again."

"Why do you need your daughter for the curse?"

"I need the menstrual blood of a virgin." She rolls her eyes. "Don't you know anything?"

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about removing curses. Maybe you should ask those men over there if you can buy some beads. They were blessed by a Voodoo priestess."

She turns to look at the tour guides and her eyes widen. "Perfect." Then she leaves without even saying goodbye.

Now, there are some street preachers in the square. They're not really stopping people like the Hindus, they're just handing out pamphlets like the strip clubs. They stay near the steps of the cathedral. One of the men looks young enough to be in high school. He's disgusted by the drunks and confused by the transvestites and tempted by the prostitutes who call him handsome. I can tell by the way he stands that he's already decided he won't be doing this next year. He's with two other men. One has thinning hair and seems happy and compassionate. The other is

round and enthusiastic but very rigid. They're dressed casually in shorts and tropical print shirts as if they're going to the beach, which looks odd because it's nearly midnight.

A ghost tour ends and the preachers speak to a few of the tourists and hand them some literature. They say things like, "God bless you," as if everyone is sneezing. People are polite, some of them are annoyed, but no one lingers long. The tourists walk away quickly, past our tables, like they're afraid of another reminder that they'll die one day. The palm reader next to me shouts at the men, "Hey! You're bad for business. Get lost!"

They ignore him. I can't blame them. The man wears a wizard hat as if he's Merlin. I'd ignore him, too. He swindles people out of their money and just does this for show. He says things like, "There is a man in your life who is important to you," and waits for the customer to supply the rest. He doesn't see them the way I do. He doesn't want to help them because he doesn't even care.

One of the members of the tour group stops at my table. He has a pamphlet in his hand and Voodoo beads around his neck. He tells me about some orbs he's seen and shows me the photos he's taken. He wants for me to divine who the orbs belong to. I tell him that I can't help him. It's a photo on a digital camera. For all I know, it's just some dust in the air which was brightened by the flash. Merlin hears our conversation and waves the man over to his table, promising he can do what I can't. The man walks away, but he's left the pamphlet behind.

In bold yellow letters, it asks me "Where are you going when you die?" I pick it up and stare at it. I wish I knew the answer. Wherever it is, I hope it's someplace where I can finally find some peace.

The round missionary, the one who is rigid, sits in my chair, and I place the pamphlet face down on the table. He looks uncomfortable on the stool.

“Where do you think we go when we die?” he asks. He’s looking at me, not past me, or through me like most of my clients.

“I’m not sure. I think we go somewhere, but I don’t think we stay intact. I think our energy goes out into the world and contributes to the energy of the whole.” I try to sound mystical.

“Like recycling?” he smiles, considering the idea. “That’s a new one.”

“I never really thought of it that way, but I guess it is a bit like recycling.”

I wait for him to speak again, but he says nothing.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

“Not really. I just noticed you reading the pamphlet we’ve been handing out, and I thought you might have some questions.” He isn’t guarded at all, but he isn’t coming to me for help either. He already has hope and peace, and I realize he’s coming to offer it to me.

“Well, I assume you believe in Heaven,” I say. I’m not sure what questions he expects me to ask.

“Yes.” He waits.

“It sounds like a nice place. Very peaceful.”

“Yes. I think it must be.” He smiles. It’s a warm smile, and for the first time, he seems to relax a little. “I’ve been told it’s a place where we’ll have no pain or tears. I guess that means we’ll be at peace.” He rubs his back.

“It would be nice to have some of that now, don’t you think?” I worry that he has some dark secret he’s going to share with me.

“I think we can. If we can accept forgiveness.” He pauses a moment.

“You make it sound easy.”

He smiles. “Yes. Easier said than done. I know. I didn’t think I deserved forgiveness either. I couldn’t let go of my guilt.”

I’m confused by this odd turn of phrase. “What do you mean?”

“I did a lot drugs when I was younger. It made me hallucinate and black out. I even tried to kill my younger brother once. Strung up a noose in my bedroom shoved his head through. If my mother hadn’t walked in she did, well.” He shakes his head. “Thank God she came back when she did. I stole a car with some friends, and that’s how I got arrested. That’s how I was saved. In jail. I had to accept the fact that I was guilty, that it wasn’t anyone else’s fault. Not my mom’s or my dad’s—mine.”

He’s being honest. Completely honest. Yet, he’s calm as he tells me these things. He has peace. He isn’t looking to me to take on this burden.

“I didn’t want to live with the guilt. Kept trying to kill myself, you know. Figured, anyone who was willing to off his own brother probably didn’t deserve to live. So they sent in this preacher, and he talked to me about forgiveness.” He stiffened again. Clearly in pain. “It wasn’t easy. It took a lot of faith. Believe me. But, he was right. And now I’ve got a whole new community that loves me and accepts me. It’s freeing.”

I nod and smile, willing to indulge him. “It must be nice to have some support. I’d love to have someone who understands.”

“You can,” he says in earnestness. “It only takes a little faith.”

“Easier said than done.” I smile.

He smiles back. “I know. But, Jesus came to this earth so we wouldn’t have to go through life alone. He offers to take on our guilt and shame and the weight of our sins –”

I interrupt him before he can say any more. “Then why is there so much left for me?”

“Because we’re human.” He looks at me for a moment. It’s a look of pity and concern. “God gave us his son, but he also gave us each other, to remind each other not to enslave ourselves to guilt. To help each other find peace.”

He waits. I look up at the cloudless sky and consider the idea of Heaven. After a while, I say, “I wonder how you get that kind of peace?”

The missionary says, “You’ve got to accept forgiveness when it’s offered. If you refuse to acknowledge your guilt, you just hold yourself back from finding the peace you’re looking for.”

I stop looking at the sky, and I look at him. Then I look around me, at the square full of people just as hurt and lost as I am, and I notice the new priest, the one with the pale skin. He’s looking up the church, and he walks past the young missionary and shakes his head at the transvestites. One of the tourists has dropped some of the Voodoo beads on the sidewalk, and the pale priest kicks them aside with his shoe. He looks over at my table and sees the missionary talking to me and scoffs.

I wish I didn’t have to carry other people’s burdens. I wish I could be free of their fears. But without me, what will they do? Without them, what will I have left? “I wish I could accept that kind of forgiveness. There’s just too much in the way,” I say.

The missionary looks sad. But, he isn’t sad for himself, he’s sad for me. The young guy, the missionary who looks like he’s in high school, comes over to my table.

“Michael,” he says to the man seated across from me, “we’ve been asked to leave. Apparently, one of these people called the church to complain.” He spits the words out and waves his hand dismissively in a sweeping gesture to indicate all of the readers lining the gate.

“Well, that’s a pity. Still. Don’t want to make trouble.” Michael extends his hand toward me, and I grasp it. He smiles. Instead of pain and fear, I feel his hope and peace, and I don’t want to let go.

“It was nice to meet you,” he says. “I hope we meet again someday.”

“Forget them, Taryn,” Merlin yells so that they can hear him. “They’re just blowing smoke. You are what you are. If you buy what they’re selling, what will you be?”

I’d like to believe I’d be better. I’d like to believe I’d finally be at peace. I’d like to believe that I wouldn’t feel so alone in the world.

I’m confident it was Merlin who complained. It doesn’t matter to him that business was slow before the missionaries arrived, and it would have been slow if they had never shown up. He’ll be bitter for days if he has to share the few customers who come, so I decide to take myself out of his competition.

I pack up my things and leave, past the line of readers, past the overflowing bars, past the drag queens and the musicians, and I stop in front of the cemetery. I can continue my walk home, to my house full of memories and shadows and the voices from my past, but instead I opt for a little quiet and I walk into the cemetery and wait for some peace.

Good Friday

“Forgive me Father, for I have sinned,” George said as he stared at the missal on the seat next to him. “It has been two months since my last confession. Well, maybe three?”

He was lying. He didn’t know the last time he’d gone to confession. He usually just took the kids before a high holiday or when his wife told him to.

“Go on,” the priest replied.

George paused, trying to decide where to begin.

Seven weeks ago, when he’d been invited to go bar hopping along Bourbon Street to celebrate the promotion of a junior partner, he would have said he was a happily married family man at the top of his career. He didn’t actually believe it at the time, but it’s what he would have said. The truth is, he and his wife hadn’t shared a truly intimate moment in more than a year. Sure, they slept in the same bed and dressed in the same room, but they faced the wall whenever they did either of these activities and rarely made eye contact throughout the day. And, while he loved his

children, he saw very little of them when they weren't sleeping or eating or watching cartoons. Work was, well, work, and though he was a partner, his share in the company was abysmally small and no one really listened to him.

At forty-five, he was acutely aware that he was no longer a young man, but when he overheard one of the interns refer to him as an "old timer" earlier that day, he was shocked. He couldn't help thinking it was true when he later found himself complaining that the timing of this particular promotion party was, at best, inconvenient. The February weather was cold – what he'd heard people refer to as a damp cold – and he didn't look forward to elbowing his way through the Mardi Gras crowds while a bunch of upstarts tried to get free lap dances from drunken sorority girls. He was flattered, however, that they'd considered him fun enough to tag along, until he realized all the senior partners had been invited. He went to fulfill his obligation and the appearance that he was a team player, hoping that perhaps this new upstart wouldn't see him as stodgy and might admire him as a potential mentor.

He followed behind his colleagues for a few hours, his stiff joints forcing him to walk slower than he wanted, and was soon lost in the crowd of party goers. As he stood on the corner of Saint Peter and Bourbon Streets searching for a familiar face, a voice behind him asked if he had a light. When he turned, he was face to face with a tall young woman whose cheeks were streaked with mascara. He handed her a handkerchief and asked what was wrong.

She shook her head. "It's nothing. Nothing at all."

When he saw her fumble through her pockets, he offered her one of his cigarettes, held out his lighter, and watched as her hazel eyes, glossy with tears, shined in the light of the flame. Her shoulders relaxed as if the weight of her worries had begun to subside, and her lips pouted as she exhaled the smoke. He handed her the rest of the pack.

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“Thank you. You’re a lifesaver,” she said as she stuffed the pack into her jacket pocket.

It was the kindest thing a woman had said to him in months and it made him feel hopeful that, perhaps, he wasn’t entirely useless after all.

“I have to get back to work,” she said as she stubbed out the cigarette on the sidewalk. Something about her was familiar, and George tried to reach back in his memory to recall where he’d seen her before. Her hourglass figure, dark brown hair, sun browned skin, and slightly husky voice were distinct and should have been easy to place.

He followed her back into the nightclub and stood at the end of the bar, watching her as she took orders, mixed drinks, tossed bottles, shook liquors, and pulled beer. Finally, she worked her way down the bar back to him.

“What can I get you?” She smiled warmly when she recognized him.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. What can I get you?”

“Gin and tonic,” he said.

“It’s on me,” she told him when he pulled out his wallet. Then she winked and handed him his drink and a napkin with her phone number scrawled on one side.

He took the napkin home in his wallet and forgot about it until he paid for lunch the next day. “Call me. Lila.” He’d never been given a woman’s number without asking for it, and he hadn’t asked for a woman’s number in nearly twenty years. He knew he should throw it away – he was married after all – but instead, he put the number back in his wallet and paid for his lunch. It was like a souvenir, a token reminding him that, though he was no longer young, he wasn’t yet old.

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George considered telling the priest that Lila had given him her number. He'd felt guilty about taking it, and it was how this whole thing started. The priest couldn't possibly fault him for doing anything wrong. It was unsolicited, even though it was in response to a kind gesture. But, what was that? Kindness. Nothing wrong with kindness.

"I ... told my wife I'd give up smoking for the New Year," George finally began.

"And?"

"I've been smoking more."

"So, you've lied to your wife."

"Yeah," George said, hoping that this admission covered all the lies he'd told her over the last several weeks. He'd lied about joining a poker night with the guys from work and was surprised by how quickly she accepted the idea that a bunch of tightwads at a major accounting firm would have a poker night in which anyone could potentially lose money. She bought it, and he took it as a sign that she had stopped caring because if she'd cared, she would have suspected the lie the moment it came out of his mouth.

"I've also been gambling," George said.

The number nagged at him the next day. It seemed to wriggle in his pocket on his way home from work, and it distracted him through dinner with his wife and children. "Call me. Lila." He managed to ignore it until the next day when he pulled out his wallet to pay for lunch.

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There was something about her, the way the tears pooled in her eyes before trickling down her cheeks, the way her lips looked when she exhaled in the damp night air, the way she winked at him in the bar as if there weren't other men half his age begging for her attention.

Maybe they did know each other and she just couldn't place his face. It had been dark, after all, and he'd aged quite a bit over the years. He pulled the napkin out of his wallet and placed it on his desk. He stared at it while waiting for his lunch to be delivered trying to ignore the knot growing in his stomach. When his secretary walked in to deliver his mail, he quickly shoved the napkin in his desk, so she wouldn't see it.

"Afternoon delivery, Mr. Fox. The awards assembly is at two o'clock at your son's school. There's construction, so you'll need to leave a little early to get there on time. Are you okay, Mr. Fox? You look pale."

"I'm fine, Jenny. Thanks." He cleared his throat.

On his way to the school, he told himself that Lila gave her number to lots of customers. They probably didn't know each other after all – she was trying to get a good tip.

He ignored the napkin through the awards ceremony and in the car as he drove his son home from school. The little smudge of soot on the boy's forehead reminded him that it was Ash Wednesday and his wife had taken the children to confession that morning because he'd told her he was too busy. He convinced himself that it was Catholic guilt which distracted him, rather than the urge to call another woman, and he managed to sit through dinner with his family without wondering whether or not Lila actually wanted him to call, but at night all the thoughts he'd pushed aside came crashing in on his dreams like waves.

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“I love you,” he said to his wife in the morning, trying to remind himself that it was true. Trying to ignore the fact that she’d been giving him the cold shoulder far too long. Trying to pretend he hadn’t been thinking of another woman.

“Thank you,” she said. Then a moment later, as if she just remembered, “I love you, too.”

The reminder was short lived, and he gave in to temptation just before lunch. He allowed the phone to ring twice before he regretted his choice and replaced the receiver into its charger. A moment later, his phone rang, and he was startled by the sound and stared at the flashing light. The call had gone directly to his private line rather than through Jenny.

“Hello?”

“Yeah. Someone just called me from this number. This is Lila.” Her voice was soft and sleepy.

“Oh. Yes. Hi. This is, George Fox. I, uh,” he stammered for words.

“George. George? How did you get my number, George?”

“You gave it to me the other night.”

“Oh, right. You gave me the cigarettes. You were such a lifesaver.” She sounded flirtatious, and he was relieved that she remembered him after all.

“I wasn’t sure if you actually wanted me to call or if you were just being nice.” The tension in George’s shoulders began to ease.

She giggled. “Do you think I give my number to every handsome man who walks into that crappy bar?” She sighed softly. It sounded almost sad.

“I didn’t really fit in there, I –” he searched for words.

“That’s why I gave you my number.”

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George sat silently, trying to decide what to say next.

“So, when will I see you again, George?”

“Are you free for lunch?” He was surprised by his quick response. He’d had no intention of meeting her, particularly for lunch. He was just curious – having convinced himself that he recognized her and that if they spoke again, it would jog his memory. For a moment, he hoped she would say “no” because he couldn’t take the chance of being seen with her. It could get back to his wife, and he loved his wife. He held his breath and closed his eyes and waited for her response.

“I need to put some clothes on,” she said. “How about the Monteleone in an hour?”

Imagining Lila lounging in bed, naked and dreamy, George pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, dabbed his face, and cleared his throat. “Yes. Yes, that sounds fine. I’ll see you there.” His hand was shaking as he placed the receiver back on the console and looked at the clock. He wasn’t sure how long it would take him to get to the Monteleone from the business district, so he left quickly.

He arrived too early and sat at the bar trying to look relaxed, but his palms were sweaty, and he fidgeted too much. He looked at his watch – still twenty minutes to wait – and debated the possibility of leaving, but he’d just ordered his drink. It was a big gamble he was taking that this might be someone he already knew and not just a younger woman looking for a sugar daddy. He looked at his watch again. The minutes were ticking by too slowly. He could easily finish his drink and leave before Lila arrived. The bar tender looked at him suspiciously and George thought perhaps the guilt was obvious. He went to the restroom to wash his hands and remove his wedding ring in the hopes that, without it, he would attract less attention from strangers. When he returned, Lila was waiting for him.

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Her dark brown hair was swept to one side, and she wore a Navy-blue pantsuit. She looked nothing like a Bourbon Street bar tender. Her eyes twinkled as she smiled and held out her hand, “It’s nice to see you again.”

George relaxed. “I don’t know if we can get a table. I didn’t put my name down when I got here.”

“Don’t worry. I know the maître d.” She winked as she turned toward the dining room.

He followed her and watched her walk. She was talking to the maître d, but she kept looking over her shoulder to make sure George was following her. When they were seated, she asked, “What took you so long to call?”

She was playing with her necklace, and George noticed a small scar below her collar bone. It was pink and raised. He wondered how she’d gotten it.

“I wasn’t sure if you actually wanted me to call.” He hesitated, “I didn’t think I should call.”

“When a girl gives a man her number, she wants him to call.”

George nodded and cleared his throat.

“So, what do you do?” she asked.

“I’m a CPA. It’s boring really.”

“I’m sure it has its charm.”

“Maybe. It’s stable and it pays the bills.”

“If you could do anything in the world and make a living at it, what would you do?” Lila raised an eyebrow.

“I’d be a musician.”

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“What do you play?” Lila was leaning forward. The top three buttons of her blouse were undone. George quickly looked away.

“Piano. But I’m no good really,” he was looking at his hands. “I haven’t practiced in a long time. Not much use for piano playing when you crunch numbers all day.” He laughed nervously.

“I’m sure you remember more than you realize. I’d love to hear you play sometime,” she said. “Do you have a piano at home?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him with her eyebrow raised, expecting him to say more.

“My daughter takes lessons. My son will start next year.”

“How old are they?”

“My daughter is eight and my son is six.” He couldn’t bring himself to say their names: Mary and John. It would be like he was dragging them into something impure.

“Lucky kids. I wish I could have taken lessons.” She opened her menu to end the conversation. They ordered their meals and chatted about the weather, traffic, and the recent sanitation strike until their food arrived.

“I thought maybe you’d meant for someone else to call you. I’m a lot older than those other guys.”

“Boys.” She rolled her eyes. “Boys are useless and boring. Men have things to say.”

George blushed and took a sip of his wine and cleared his throat. “I can’t think of anything to say to that.”

She laughed. “What do you do when you’re not crunching numbers?”

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“I go to recitals and little league games. I watch the Saints play. Work functions. I don’t know. It’s all a big boring blur.”

“That’s so much more interesting than ‘hang out.’” She was smiling and playing with her necklace again. “I’d love to do some of those things. I usually just wander around the Quarter, get high, and try to avoid being groped at work.”

“People try to grope you? Well, of course they do. You’re a hot bartender. People are terrible.” He felt his face redden.

“They’re not bad people, just lost.” She adjusted her collar as if she’d just remembered her scar.

“I’m sure you could get a job doing something else,” George said.

“Well, the tips are decent. Not as good as the last few places I’ve worked.” She stabbed her steak. “I mean, I made a lot more working at the S&M place, and some months I’ve thought about going back, but it pays the bills and gives me enough time to write. I think if I got a regular job, I’d spend my whole life wondering if it’s all worth it, you know?”

George did know. He wondered the very same thing almost every day. He sat back in his chair and nodded as Lila continued talking, picturing her in a black bustier and whip, wondering if she preferred giving spankings or receiving them. It surprised him that she was able to talk about herself so openly, and that’s when he remembered who she reminded him of: His first girlfriend, his first love, Natalie.

Natalie’s mother was diagnosed with cancer during their junior year of high school. Soon after the chemo made the woman little more than a rag doll, Natalie’s step-father started hitting on her, so she moved in with her grandmother for a while. Her mother’s hospital bills were mounting, and soon she dropped out of high school to help pay the bills. She worked as a

waitress at first, then as a stripper, and soon was little more than a shell of the girl he'd fallen in love with.

The last contact George had with her was while he was in college. She called him one night and asked him to pick her up because she was too drunk to drive herself home. When George arrived at the club where Natalie worked, she was standing outside crying. He gave her a cigarette and his coat, but she wouldn't tell him why she was crying until they were in her driveway.

"I love you, you know?" she said. "I've always loved you."

"I love you, too."

"Things have been pretty bad for me lately. It's been really hard." Her cheeks were streaked with mascara.

"I know they have. Why don't you let me help you? You can move in with my parents and finish school, and I'll get a job. We –"

"A man offered to pay me a lot of money if I'd sleep with him tonight." She held her breath a moment. "And I can't let you help me, because I took it. I called you because I wanted you to know that I loved you. I wanted to tell you before I forget what that feels like."

She opened the door and stepped out of the car before George had a chance to respond. He'd always wondered what happened to Natalie, and as he sat across from Lila, he wondered how she'd gotten there. What ugly secrets was she keeping?

"What do you write?" George asked.

"Songs mostly. A little poetry. I'd love to be a singer someday. Like a singer-songwriter." Then she frowned. "But that doesn't make much money."

"What kind of songs?"

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“Oh. Nothing special. Folksy stuff about the beauty of life and hope. That sort of thing.”

Lila pulled her collar close to her neck.

“That’s not really what I would have expected,” George replied.

“Well, it’s how I see things,” Lila said. “I mean, people suck, but I think there’s still some good in the world. You don’t always find it where you expect it, but it’s there.”

George looked at his watch. “I’ve got to get back to work. I’m sorry.” He motioned to the waiter for the check.

By the time they stepped into the lobby, it had started to rain. George gave his ticket to the valet and waited for his car.

“Well, thank you for lunch. It was nice to actually talk to you.” Lila paused, “Listen, I don’t know if it’s your thing, but my roommate is in a band, and they’re playing a gig on Friday. It’s a little loud, but it’s a lot of fun and... Well, if you’re interested, call me.”

Before George could respond, Lila was pushing the door open and stepping on to the sidewalk. She waved back at him through the glass and hailed a cab.

He was distracted for the rest of the afternoon, sitting through meetings impatiently, looking at his watch, tapping his foot, growing more and more annoyed that the day had not ended. He kept thinking about Lila – about what she might look like as a dominatrix and the things she’d done to earn tips – and he thought about Natalie and wondered what had become of her.

When he was finally able to leave work, he took the long way home, so he would have some time to reflect on his day and to decide if there was any need to tell his wife about Lila. When he walked into the house, his daughter was whining.

“It’s too hard,” Mary pouted and crossed her arms defiantly.

“What’s too hard?” George asked loudly as he took off his jacket.

“This piece. That stupid woman wants me to learn it for my recital. It’s too hard. I can’t do it,” she stomped her foot.

George walked over to the piano and looked at the piece. “Try it. Let’s see what you know.” He pointed to the bench and Mary sat down. She pressed a few keys and stopped.

“See. It’s too hard. No one can play this.”

George sat next to her, cracked his knuckles, wiggled his fingers, and looked at her with his eyebrow raised. He pressed the keys, slowly at first, remembering the notes, and soon he was playing the tempo and the chords with no hesitation. The song was short and the piece was simple, but he was pleased to see how much he remembered. Mary’s skepticism was replaced with surprise. “When did you learn that?”

“When I was your age. Now, show me what you know.” They sat at the piano for nearly an hour while Mary pressed keys and George corrected her fingers, until she played the entire song. It made him happy to be at the piano spending time with his daughter. His wife watched them, and when they were finished she smiled and told him, “You’re a good dad.”

“Thanks. I try,” George replied, pleased to finally have received a compliment from her. He sat through dinner, listening to the chatter of his children, nodding as his wife talked about her day and decided there was no need to mention Lila or lunch because nothing had happened. Surely, there was no reason to see her again.

“The nanny is coming Friday night.”

“What?” George responded, confused by his wife’s sudden announcement.

“I’m on call all weekend, so the nanny is coming to stay Friday night. That way you don’t have to worry about the kids if I have to go in for surgery.”

“Julie, you don’t have to do that. I can be here for the kids.”

“I know. But, if any of the guys from work invite you to a poker night or something, I just don’t want you to feel like you need to be here.”

“Now that you mention it, I was invited to do something this Friday.”

“Oh? Well, it’s a good thing I already talked to the nanny then,” Julie said, smiling.

“Gambling?” the priest asked. “Okay. Have you lost a lot of money this way?”

“No. Not really. But, the stakes are pretty high. I’ve been lying to my wife about that, too.” George said.

“I see. And what do you risk losing with these bets you’ve been making?”

“A lot,” George said, unwilling to admit that he was jeopardizing his marriage and his family.

“What is, ‘a lot’?”

“Well,” George hesitated. “Everything, I guess.”

On Friday, when George returned from lunch, the light on his phone was flashing. He dialed into his answering service. “Um, Hi, George. This is Lila. I haven’t heard from you, and I didn’t know if you were interested in coming to this little gig tonight, but I figured I might as well give

you the address in case you decided to swing by....” George listened to the message three times before he was sure he’d written the information correctly.

That evening, he pulled into the parking lot of the address Lila had given him. He turned off the ignition and headlights and stared at the sign: The Howlin’ Wolf. The mural on the side of the wall, the people meandering between the tables and stools scattered along the sidewalk, the piercings and tattoos all made George feel out of place. Just as he turned on the ignition to leave, Lila tapped on his window and waved.

“I’m so glad to see you! I wasn’t sure if you got my message.”

George hesitated. “Well, I can’t stay long.”

“Let me buy you a drink.”

One drink led to another, a third drink led to some food, and soon George and Lila were chatting and laughing like old friends. The music started and the crowd of people made the air sticky and hot. After several shots and a couple of joints, Lila began to feel sick and went outside for air. George followed her into the alley and put his arm under her shoulder to keep her from falling.

“I think it’s time for you to go home,” he said.

“No, no. I’m fine. Really.” She was trying to stand up straight, but couldn’t keep her balance.

“C’mon, we’re going,” and he pulled her toward himself to help her walk. She didn’t argue or resist. They walked a few blocks to her apartment, and he waited by the door while she looked for her key.

“I can’t find it,” she said, and she handed him her purse. He unlocked the main door and followed her up the stairs to unlock her apartment.

“Now, lock the door behind me, okay? And go to bed. Don’t drink anymore,” he said.

She looked at him and smiled. “You’re a real lifesaver, you know that?”

He smiled and nodded. “Okay. Take care of yourself. I’ll call you tomorrow to check on you.”

“Aw, you’re such a good guy. I just love you,” she said before she shut the door. George waited for the locks to click and then he left. He stood outside of her building for a few minutes looking up at the windows, trying to decide which one was hers. He wished she’d pulled him into the door with her instead of closing it behind him. He walked slowly back to his car in the hopes that the fresh night air would clear his mind of all the things he wished he had the courage to do.

At home, he found Julie already asleep. He took a book to the living room and stayed up sipping his scotch and soda. He sat with the book open on his lap, staring at the words, but fantasizing about what he might have found inside Lila’s apartment. He fell asleep on the couch and awoke shortly before dawn, stiff and sore. His knees popped and cracked as he trudged to the bedroom and took off his clothes before getting into bed next to his wife. She had taken all the pillows, so he wrestled one out of her arms. “Not now,” she moaned and rolled over.

He lay awake for a few more hours adding up all the ways he tried to demonstrate his love for his wife – putting her through medical school, buying a huge house, hiring a maid and a nanny – and dividing it by the number of times he’d gone to sleep with only a pillow for comfort. The math gave him a headache, but it was easier than accepting the fact that one way or the other, he was in a deficit.

“Everything?” the priest asked. “You stand to risk everything with this gambling?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. I don’t know,” George hesitated. “Maybe I’ve already lost it.”

“Wouldn’t you know?”

“I don’t know, Father. I feel like it’s already gone. Like it’s been gone for a long time.”

The priest nodded.

George asked, “Can you lose something that’s already lost?”

“I think if a thing is truly lost, you’d notice. If you’re not sure, perhaps you still have it.”

“Maybe,” George mumbled, wondering whether or not his wife really loved him.

“Perhaps the question to ask is, what do you think can be gained through this gambling?”

George sat silently, considering the question. What could be gained? Validation.

Acceptance. Passion. Energy. Feeling like a man again. Finally, he said, “Love.”

When he called to check on her, Lila thanked him for taking her home. Relieved that he’d done the gentlemanly thing and this obligation to her was over, he resolved never to see her again. Yet for days he dreamed of her, woke in a feverish sweat, and took a cold shower almost every morning. Every time he thought of her, he tried to distract himself. He did the dishes, polished his shoes, helped Mary with her piano practice, played catch with John. Yet every night, there she was.

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On Friday, he walked into his home after work, expecting to be greeted by his wife and children, and found a note: “Called in at the last minute. Nanny is taking the kids for pizza and movies. You’re on your own for dinner. Julie.” He stood in the empty house and listened to the noises of whirring fans and ticking clocks and wondered what it would be like if Lila lived there with him. He imagined her dancing around the living room, wearing something slinky, and slowly making her way to the bedroom.

Looking for a distraction, he went to a sports bar for dinner. The noise and commotion and the beer he had with his meal helped him clear his head enough to decide that his attraction to Lila was more about his desire to help her than his desire to have her. *Yes, he told himself, I want to help her. She’s so much like Natalie, I’d hate myself if I didn’t do everything I can to help her.* Instead of heading home, he drove toward the French Quarter.

When he walked into the bar, she smiled and poured him a drink. They chatted between customers, and she offered him a joint on her break. They wandered around the Quarter when the manager decided business was too slow to stay open, and she sang down the streets, danced to the music that billowed through windows and doors, and giggled when the Tarot readers tried to convince her they could tell her fortune. Her youth and energy were infectious and George found himself wanting more.

During the next few weeks, he made excuses to call her during lunch and soon was talking to her every day. On Fridays, he would meet her for dinner and follow her to work where he’d have a few drinks. Her manager generally let her leave early since things were unusually slow during Lent, and George and Lila would spend the rest of the night wandering through the Quarter ignoring the clock.

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After a month, Lila asked him to go with her to a cemetery on the other side of town. She had a bottle of tequila and a bag of lime wedges in her purse, and George was intrigued. They wandered among the headstones and burial tombs, looking at the dates and reading the inscriptions, speculating about how people had died, when Lila stopped in front of a small vault and pulled out the tequila.

“This is it,” she said.

“What?”

“The one I came here for. This is my best friend.” She pointed to the name *Michael Hebert, 1987-2003*. She took a drink and sucked on a lime wedge. “Here,” she said as she handed them to George.

“How did he die?”

“Suicide.” She took another drink.

George felt a chill as he watched her become sullen and quiet.

“My mom wouldn’t let me go to the funeral. So, I come here on his birthday every year. I don’t know how else to say goodbye.”

“Why wouldn’t she let you go to the funeral?”

“She’s really religious. Said that we shouldn’t celebrate the death of people who choose to go to Hell. Said that I shouldn’t have been friends with him in the first place.” She took another drink. “Bitch.”

George handed her a lime wedge.

“When I told her I couldn’t go to church with her anymore because it would make me a hypocrite, she beat me. That’s how I got this scar.” She pointed to her neck. “When I told her I

couldn't believe in a God who would send a deranged person to Hell, she kicked me out of the house."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen." She took another drink. "Michael's mom let me live with her for a while, but it didn't work out. When I turned sixteen, I got my GED, bought a fake ID and got my bartending license." She took another drink and offered some to George, then she poured the rest of the bottle onto the ground. She lit up a joint and sat down with her back against the tomb. George sat down beside her, and they smoked in silence.

Finally, Lila said, "Thanks for coming."

"Of course." George didn't know what else to say.

She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he put his arm around her.

"I really loved him," she whispered.

George nodded.

"I really love you, too," she said and squeezed his hand.

"Love? What kind of love can be won by gambling?" The priest was silent for a moment. "The only kind of love I can think of, is the kind which could be easily bought. Is that really the kind of love that's worth losing everything for?"

George considered the question. "I think the real question is, what kind of love *isn't* worth losing everything for?"

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Week after week, George watched Lila turn down men who tried to flirt with her and noticed how different she was from his wife.

While his wife obsessed about retirement and college funds, Lila rarely spoke of the future, which George took as evidence of her ability to live in the moment. While Julie maintained a meticulously timed calendar, Lila rarely made plans and her enthusiasm for spontaneity was invigorating. While Julie never showed signs of affection, even after twenty years and two children and sharing a house and a bed, Lila hugged George almost every time she saw him.

The more time he spent with Lila, the more he liked her, and the more he liked himself. He looked forward to their meetings and tried to arrange them often. But at the end of the day, when he walked back into his home and heard the gentle hum of the life he'd been living for the last twenty years, he was overcome by the grief of his guilt.

It wasn't long before his feelings of guilt were accompanied by nagging dread. If his wife spoke to his "poker buddies" or if she checked his phone records, she would think he was having an affair. She might kick him out, she might ask for a divorce, she might misunderstand what was going on. He didn't see anything wrong with spending a little time with another person. They weren't sleeping together. He was just being a friend to someone who needed a friend. He tried to shake it off, yet he no longer enjoyed his daily routine, no longer looked forward to the gentle hum that filled the house when his family was home.

One evening, as he sat with his family at the kitchen table eating dinner and the children chattered about school, Julie reminded him that she would be taking the children to her sister's

house in Mobile over the weekend. He nodded his acknowledgement of the news and focused on eating his okra.

“You’re welcome to come with us, but I know you have your poker night on Friday,” she reminded him.

George didn’t like being in his house alone. He didn’t like the silence of empty rooms. When he was left alone, he slept with the TV on and left radios playing throughout the house. Julie found this tendency to be childish, so he said nothing about spending the weekend alone and made no offer to abandon his plans. After the children went to sleep, George took a glass of whiskey to bed and stayed awake reading. Julie tossed and turned and covered her head with the blankets and snorted and finally said, “George! Please, for the love of God. I have surgery tomorrow morning at seven, I need sleep.”

The next day, just after noon he received a phone call from Lila. “My roommate’s band is playing a gig tomorrow night. I know it’s very last minute, but I’ll buy you a drink if you come. He needs some supporters.”

George was relieved to have an excuse to avoid his empty house. He spent the evening helping his children pack for their party and kissed them both on the forehead at bedtime. Then he went into the living room and slid his arm around his wife and kissed her neck. “I love you,” he whispered into her ear, hoping she’d return the sentiment – that she’d give him a reason to stay away from Lila forever.

She smiled. “I’m glad.”

“The kids are in bed.” He kissed the other side of her neck.

“Good. I’m so exhausted, I don’t know if I could have dealt with them tonight.”

“I took care of it.” He brushed her hair away from her face.

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“Thanks.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I’m going to get ready for bed.”

He followed her into the bedroom and sat on the bed while she was in the bathroom changing. When she came out in a flannel nightgown and night cream smeared on her face, he groaned. “I guess I’ll get ready for bed, too.”

The next day, George engrossed himself with work, trying to keep his mind from wandering. He ate dinner at a small café before heading to the bar to meet Lila. He was early and decided to order himself a drink, which soon turned into three. As he ordered the fourth round, he heard his name and looked around to see Lila waving at him from a corner where a bench and a few empty tables lined the back wall.

“How many people are coming?” George asked, careful not to slur his words.

“I have no idea. Most of them will stay near the front. I just guard the table, so they have a place to sit between sets.” Lila was leaning close to him, so she wouldn’t have to yell. George stared down her shirt.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said.

He didn’t realize he’d said it aloud until Lila responded, “Thanks. You’re not so bad yourself,” and winked playfully.

“You are. And you’re kind and full of life.” He realized that he’d started to slur, and he moved a little closer, so he wouldn’t have to speak loudly.

“Oh, stop. I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

“No. I don’t. I’m sure you hear it all the time though.” George cleared his throat trying to regain the appearance of sobriety.

“No. I don’t,” she said quietly.

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They sat in silence and watched as the bar became more and more chaotic. They were so close to each other that their arms were touching. Neither of them moved until the music started. Then Lila went to the bathroom, and George put his arm on the back of the bench to steady himself. When Lila returned, she pulled a flask out of her purse and poured some of the contents into her glass. She poured the rest into George's glass and sat down next to him.

"They're a good band," he said. He was so close to her that he could smell her hair.

She nodded and sipped her drink. Then she turned to him so that she was speaking in his ear, her voice was low. "Do you actually think they're good?"

He dropped his arm from the bench. It brushed along her back and landed on the seat behind her. "Not really."

"So why are you here?" Lila asked.

"Because you asked me to come." He said into her ear, matching her low voice.

She looked at him for a moment. Their faces were so close they were nearly touching.

"Are you going to regret this tomorrow?" she asked.

"I have no idea."

Lila nodded. She bent her head forward and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "What about now?"

George said nothing. Lila picked up her purse and set it on her lap. "It's your choice."

He looked at her a moment. His vision was foggy, and he felt a little dizzy. He picked up his coat and nodded.

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“Let me ask you another question,” the priest said after George was silent a while. “What kind of love are you offering?”

“What do you mean?” George asked.

“Well. Are you offering real love, or the kind that could be easily bought? Maybe that’s the real gamble. Maybe the stakes aren’t what you’ll win or lose, but what part of yourself you’ll have to give up in the process.”

George nodded as he considered the advice. “Yeah, Father. I think you’re right.” He stood up to leave and sat down quickly. “Sorry, Father. I don’t...Can I go? I’m supposed to say something right?”

The priest smiled and told George which prayers to pray, blessed him, and dismissed him. George got in his car and drove without even thinking about the turns and stops, until he was parked in Lila’s parking lot looking up at her window from inside his car. He opened the door and walked to the building, pressed the buzzer for her apartment, and waited.

“Yeah?” Lila’s voice crackled.

“It’s me,” George said.

“Alright.”

He waited for the click and opened the door. He walked slowly up the stairs to Lila’s apartment door, hoping he would know what to say when he saw her. She opened the door and leaned against the molding with her arms crossed. “Are you feeling better?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I offer to take you home with me, and you ditch me at the curb because you don’t feel well. It’s a little weird.”

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“I... yeah. I’m feeling better. Sorry.”

She looked confused. “Why are you here? I thought we were meeting for dinner later.”

“I have something to tell you.” George rubbed his chin, trying to stall, to make sure he said it right.

“Come in.” Lila moved out of the way, and George stepped across the threshold. “What is it?”

“I love you,” George said, after Lila shut the door.

She held her breath.

“And I wanted to tell you before I forget what it feels like. I mean, what it means to really love someone the way they deserve to be loved.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “You deserve better than this. You deserve something real.”

Tears started to pool in her eyes, and he worried that he might not be able to finish.

“I can’t see you anymore,” George said. He knew he was doing it for her, but when the lump formed in his throat and the tears stung his eyes, he knew he was doing it for himself too.

“What?” she asked between sobs. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No! No, it’s me. All me. All my fault. I realize that now. I can’t keep doing this. It’s not fair to you, and I love you too much. You deserve someone who can love you the way you love. Openly and completely. I can’t,” he said and opened the door to leave. “Take care of yourself, and lock up behind me.”

He considered waiting outside her door to listen for the locks to click into place, but he was afraid that if he waited too long, he would change his mind. He cleared his throat and tried to swallow as he walked down the stairs and out of the building. Before he turned on the ignition,

he tried to rub the cloudiness from his eyes. When he parked in his driveway, he pulled a napkin from his wallet and threw it away.



Dear John

You know that I've always hated saying goodbye when the Navy sends you away. You have me drop you off at the airfield and leave right away. "Like pulling off a Band-Aid," you say. I watch the other wives and girlfriends standing around holding on to the last moments with their loved ones, and it's always made me sad that you won't let me do the same.

"It hurts too much," you told me one time. "Saying goodbye is bad enough, but a long goodbye is worse."

I put the car in park, and you get out, grab your bags, and kiss me quickly.

"I'll see you soon," you always say, even though it will be months, and you hug me tight. I think you must count the seconds so you don't hold me too long. Despite the pain, there's something comforting in the routine of it all.

"I'll be here." I say, and then I get back in the car.

I never cry until I'm driving away. Some women blubber and pout, like their husbands are leaving them on purpose just to hurt their feelings. I don't do that. I stay strong. I never want you to worry about me, to think I can't handle it on my own, to be scared to do your job.

But, I'm not strong. I just save my tears of pity for myself.

It takes a few weeks to fall asleep at night in a newly empty house in a newly empty bed. I always get sleeping pills before you leave. With the ninety-day supplies from the base pharmacy, I've got a small stockpile now. They'll come in handy.

Every time the phone rings, there's a sense of urgency in case the line goes dead and you can't call back for months. I answer the phone for every unknown number just in case it's you, and I practically spit at the telemarketers for getting my hopes up and then dashing them with their annoying solicitations.

After a few weeks of no contact, the dreams come. I dream about the phone call, about the telegram, about the chaplain knocking at my door. I go through the day dreading every phone call and jumping with every knock. After a while, I imagine the relief.

I think, *if the chaplain knocks on the door today, at least it will be over.* The waiting. The dread. The fear. I'll be done, and I can move on.

Then I feel sick to my stomach.

I remind myself of the good times. I try to stay strong.

Do you remember when we met? I had the uncanny feeling of déjà vu that night. I don't know if I ever told you, but I was being set up with a Navy pilot. I was at the bar in that green dress which complimented my red hair, and I was swirling a straw in my piña colada when you walked in. You sat at the other end of the bar with one of your buddies from base and you both ordered whiskey sodas. You noticed me and smiled, and I looked around to see if you were smiling at me. Your blue eyes and dimples made it hard to look away.

I didn't notice that the pilot had walked in and was standing next to me with his hand extended.

His name was Brad, and he was round faced and short and his voice squeaked. As I shook Brad's hand and he plopped onto the stool next to me, I felt as though I was being watched from the other end of the bar. I kept looking over to see if you were still there, but by the time I finished my drink, you were gone. I excused myself to the ladies' room, and when I walked back out, you were coming in from the terrace.

You smiled. "Having a good night?"

"Could be better." I hoped I was acting coy.

You held out your hand, "John."

And I took it, “Rachel.”

For just a brief moment, as we stood there holding hands, something was very familiar. I felt as though I’d met you before. Like I’d known you forever.

Sometimes, I wonder if reincarnation is true. I wonder if we can actually have memories from past lives. Maybe that’s what déjà vu is. Maybe your soul can go backwards and forwards in time and at those moments, it’s confused about where it’s supposed to be. Maybe déjà vu is your soul’s way of preparing you for something important. Your future self coming back to tell you “pay attention.”

I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you on our first date. We went to that carnival, and you wore a ball cap and a black t-shirt and ducked your head down every time you saw someone you knew.

“I’m trying to avoid people from base,” you said.

I looked up at you and asked, “And, how tall are you?”

You grinned. “Six-five. But, that’s why I have the hat. See? The hat?”

I laughed. “Yeah. You blend.”

You won a teddy bear for me at one of those ball toss games, and I learned about your short lived t-ball career back in Minnesota. I waited at a picnic table while you stood in line for funnel cakes. They were piled with powdered sugar, and I tried to eat carefully, so I wouldn’t get any on my clothes. You snickered and wiped sugar off my nose with your thumb. I laughed and pointed to the sugar you’d spilled all over your shirt.

You got embarrassed and tried to wipe it off only to watch the sugar smear like paint. I pulled a cardigan out of my purse and leaned over to wipe off your chest. Your cologne was faint, and you flexed a little.

I winked and said, “Works every time.”

We stood in line for the carousel and leaned against the metal railing and shared blue cotton candy. I teased you because, when you smiled, your teeth were bright blue, so you rubbed your teeth dry and smiled again so that your upper lip curled up above your gum line.

“What? What are you looking at?” you asked, playing it up. I love that you could make me laugh.

I have no idea how long we stood in line, but it didn’t seem long enough.

When we got onto the platform, I looked for the purple horse I’d loved as a girl, but someone else had gotten to it first. You called me over to a bench seat and put your arm around my shoulders when I shivered, and I inched closer to you until my hips were touching yours.

As the circle rotated, I saw a photo booth and pointed it out. When the platform stopped, you held out your hand to help me step down and didn’t let go until we were sitting on the bench in the photo booth. You insisted that it was too small, and I had to sit on your lap. We smiled and you put your chin on my shoulder, and your breath was warm on my neck. Then you slid your arms around my waist. I turned toward you to put my arm around your shoulder, and you kissed me as the camera flashed.

“For luck,” you said when you pulled the photo strip out and handed it to me.

I didn’t ask how it would bring me luck. But, I remember the sparkle in your eyes when you found it in a box, years later, and said, “See. I told you it was lucky.”

When we moved into this soulless house six months ago, it seemed full of potential. Even though we knew you’d be leaving again, it still felt like a fresh start – like we could finally start building our lives together. I got shelves for the books and nails for the pictures and things have progressed slowly, and I’ve been turning this place into a home.

It's the photos that I wanted to find first. The memories that marked our past lives. I've put them side by side in the same frames – photos of our first bikes, trips to the beach, the graduations, and the diplomas – all displayed together, like we've shared our whole lives. The milestones we celebrated before we met each other and the moments we shared together, on the walls like a road map marking how we got here. Now, I have to remove the frames from the wall one by one and wrap them in paper. It's like reliving my life one still at a time.

They say when you die, your life flashes before you. Is it like watching a slide show? I hope it's only the good things we remember.

I couldn't bring myself to pack our wedding photo. You and your groomsmen are all in uniform, and you look timeless in your dress whites. That's the word I said to the wedding planner when she asked what theme I wanted: Timeless.

It meant a lot to me that our wedding was at the same chapel where my parents and grandparents were married. I waited in a small room with my family for the ceremony to begin. I kept fidgeting. Nerves, my grandpa called it, but I was just excited. My grandparents told me about their wedding day and the eighty year old minister who kept forgetting where he was in the order of service. My parents told me about the pregnant bridesmaid who fainted during the vows.

Grandpa escorted Grandma, my brother escorted my mom, and then it was my turn. My dad leaned in and whispered, "Let's walk slow, okay?"

You were at the end of the aisle in your crisp white uniform standing at parade rest, the lights shining on you so that you looked exactly like one of the guardian angels I imagined as a child. I felt so safe, knowing I'd be spending the rest of my life with you.

You shook my father's hand and took mine, and we turned to face the minister. I could feel you watching me through the ceremony, sometimes glancing out the corner of your eye. You

squeezed my hand when you said “I do” and only let go when we exchanged rings. When the minister said, “You may kiss the bride,” cameras flashed and my uncle yelled, “Get ‘er done!” and we both turned red.

The groomsmen held up their swords in an arch, and you had to duck to walk under them. You held me close, slid your arm around my waist, and we walked down the aisle together like we were the only two people in the world.

It didn’t last long – the illusion that we lived in a world all our own – because you were deployed just a few months later. Where was it that time? Afghanistan? Burkina Fasso? They all blur together for me. Between the deployments and training and field exercises, you’ve been gone for half our marriage. I guess that was the illusion, huh? The idea that we’d build our lives together was just a joke.

Your deployment schedules have been impossible to predict. One time, you’re supposed to be gone for six months, but you’re actually gone for ten. Another time, you’re supposed to be gone for eight months, and you come home three months early.

The wives’ support group always tries to make a big to-do out of the homecomings, but the change of dates throws them off every time. They try to turn the hangar into a carnival – with music and bouncy houses and raffles – to keep people entertained while we wait on the planes to land. Every time the date changes, something is cancelled, and they’re lucky to be able to coordinate USO volunteers, streamers, flags, and coloring contests.

About a week before the battalion returns home, the families get a letter telling us where and when to pick up our service members. That’s when I book a day at the spa and go to the lingerie store and get a new outfit. I can’t sleep the night before a homecoming and always get

up really early. I pull into the parking lot about thirty minutes before you're supposed to arrive, but the time is never right, and I usually wait about three hours.

The first year, I waited in the hangar with everyone else. The noise of crying children was nearly drowned by the din of nervous chatter echoing from the metal walls and roof. There was no relief from the humid air and my makeup started melting, my hair fell flat, and my clothes wrinkled and stuck to my skin. After that, I started waiting in my car, running the air at thirty minute intervals, and I walk into the hangar when I see the plane land on the tarmac.

The second I see you step off the plane, I feel a weight lift off my chest. Like I've been holding my breath the whole time you've been gone. I work my way through the crowd. We hug, and we kiss.

You whisper in my ear, "It's good to see you, I can't wait to get home."

"I've got a surprise waiting," I say and wiggle my eyebrows. I always tease you that I'm going to install a swing or a pole in the bedroom one day, but I'd never have the guts to do something like that.

When you're gone, I live for your phone calls. To hear your voice, to know you're alright, it makes the whole room brighter, the whole day better. I know contact can be sporadic, but when you're at a top secret location, it's even less frequent and even more frightening, so when you finally called, I couldn't have been happier!

"What time is it there?" I asked.

"You know it's an undisclosed location, if I tell you the time zone it would be too easy to figure out where I am."

"Who do you think I'm going to tell?"

"The phones are tapped. They record our conversations at random," you said.

“I guess that’s why I hear an echo.” I felt like I had to talk louder than normal to drown myself out. “Wanna talk dirty? Give them something fun to hear?”

You laughed. “There are other people in the room. So, why don’t you do the talking and I’ll listen.”

“That’s no fun. When will you be home?”

“Soon. Things are going better than we thought. I think I’ll be home early.”

“I should have the house unpacked by the time you get here. I’ve got a surprise waiting for you,” I said, rubbing my flat belly, wondering how big it will become.

“Oh, yeah?” You asked in a suggestive tone, like you were remembering my threats to install a swing.

“Yeah.” I tried to keep from giggling.

We talked a little longer. You couldn’t tell me what you were working on, but you did tell me some funny stories about the guys standing watch. The things you all do to entertain yourselves – the guy who was tricked into eating MREs that had been thrown into the latrine, the contest to see who could collect the most belly button lint. I told you about the crazy neighbor who let dogs lick her in the mouth, and previews for movies I thought you’d enjoy.

Then, as if an alarm had sounded, you said, “Okay. Well, I’ve got to go. It’s a satellite phone and the other guys want to call home before the signal gets weak again. I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’ll see you soon.”

I’m glad we got to say it one last time. I’ve been saving your voicemails over the years just so I can hear your voice when you’re gone. It’s not the same though, not nearly enough. Not when I really need a hug. Not when I really need my best friend.

Cole was sent home early. After only a month, they found him in his bunk staring at the ceiling. They called his name over and over, and he didn't answer. Someone shook his shoulder, and he flinched. He almost attacked the guy. The officer gave him an order, and he wouldn't get down from the bunk. They dragged him out and put him in the brig. The officer decided to send him in for a psych evaluation which he failed, and they sent him home.

That's all he would tell me when I met him for dinner a few weeks ago, and he handed me his photo album. It was full of pictures of the desert, the cities, and the people he'd met. He talked about the desert like it was some kind of carnival. Then, in the back, there were Hum-Vs that had been in roadside bombings and helicopters that had crashed – all splattered in blood.

"I thought you were a mechanic," I said.

He reached for the book, "You're not supposed to see those."

I pulled away, "Why do you have these? How did you get them?"

"I'm a mechanic. I have to fix the vehicles when they're damaged."

"But, you're not supposed to be in combat."

"How do you think the vehicles get damaged?" he whispered.

I kept flipping the pages. There were pictures of an outdoor market, ash and smoke obscuring the stalls, people huddled and crying, a man lying in the street on his back, his head split in half and his brain seeping onto the pavement. His eyes were open, like he didn't realize he was dead. It has terrorized my dreams ever since. His eyes were still open.

Every night after that, I've seen you in my sleep, walking through the market. You're happy to see me, grinning, and then a trickle of blood will fall from the corner of your lip. Sometimes, I roll over and see you lying on the pillow beside me, watching me sleep. I lean over to kiss you and your head is cracked like an egg. Your eyes wide open.

It was like that when Grandpa died last year, while you were on deployment. My whole family was having dinner at my grandparents' house, sitting around the dinner table pretending to argue about something inane. We were laughing and getting louder and louder, competing to be heard.

Grandpa had just taken a bite of his chicken, and he leaned over to say something clever to my brother. He had that look on his face, you know the kind of wait-till-you-hear-this sort of look, and he leaned in. And he just kept leaning. He couldn't stop. My brother put out an arm to help Grandpa get his balance, but he just kept falling until he'd slumped half in his chair and half on the floor.

It was all so fast, and it was all slow motion. I grabbed the phone and had to run outside because everyone was screaming. I couldn't remember the address.

"He's losing his breath," I yelled at the operator.

"What does that mean?" she asked me.

"It means he's losing the ability to breathe! What do you think it means? His lips are turning blue. His face is purple. He's losing his breath."

Through the window I could see my father giving mouth-to-mouth and my brother doing chest compressions. A neighbor had just stepped out to check his mail. He waved at me cheerfully and then dropped his hand when he saw me crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Please. Help. I can't remember the address. I need someone to tell them where to send the ambulance."

He took the phone and nodded.

I heard my mother yelling, “Not now! You stubborn old man. Don’t you do this now. Wake up!”

I ran inside. My brother stood up, suddenly. All the color drained from his face, he looked like he might vomit, and he burst into tears. “I’ve crushed him! Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God!”

My father continued to do mouth-to-mouth, and I ran over to kneel beside my grandfather and began pumping on his chest to the rhythm of my brother’s protestations. The neighbor walked in, still on the phone. I was counting aloud, and he was telling me what the operator was saying. I couldn’t hear anything. Then, he started counting, and I realized he was giving me the rhythm. I looked up at him and locked eyes. That was the moment. The moment when everything felt familiar and terrifying all at once. The moment of *déjà vu*. I knew I’d been in that moment before, that I would be in it again, and that part of me would be there forever.

I nodded. And he counted again.

He was there, next to me and my father when Grandpa’s lungs collapsed and the air burbled back out as if he refused to take it any more. My father looked at me and I said, “I’ve got it, Dad. I’ll keep going.”

He let out a loud gasping cry, and his shoulders heaved with the effort of his weeping. I’ve never seen my father weep. I closed my eyes and felt my own tears as my hands pumped up and down. Dad didn’t cry long. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes with his fists, and nodded. Then he went back to doing respirations. We stayed there, pumping and breathing and counting, until the ambulance arrived.

When the paramedics wheeled off Grandpa’s body, I tried calling you, forgetting that you were on deployment. I sat down in the dining room, staring at Grandpa’s half eaten plate of food,

and all I wanted was my husband's arms around me, telling me everything is okay. The neighbor was there – a stranger, a man I didn't even know – and he asked me if I needed anything else.

"My husband," was all I could say. But, no one could help me with that.

I tried to be strong, to act normal, but in my dreams, Grandpa died again and again for weeks, and I laid in bed alone night after night staring into the dark trying not to relive the memory.

Fifty years. That's how long they got, and if you'd ask Grandma, she'd say it wasn't enough. Fifty years. I only got five.

When the phone call came, I was out of town for my cousin's wedding. I had just arrived at the restaurant for the bridesmaids' brunch when I got the phone rang and I saw it was an unknown number. I scrambled to answer before it went to voicemail.

"Mrs. Miller?" I thought it might be a salesperson, and I was already annoyed.

"Yes."

"This is Petty Officer Horrox. Are you aware that your husband has been stationed at an undisclosed location for the past two months?"

"Yes." I whispered.

"Ma'am?"

I cleared my throat and stopped in front of the entrance. "Yes."

"I'm very sorry to notify you by phone, Ma'am, but our attempts to reach you in person were unsuccessful."

"I'm out of town." I felt like I was losing my breath. My stomach started to cramp. I sat down on a concrete bench beside the door.

“His position was compromised. I’m sorry to inform you, but we haven’t been able to recover him. Your husband is presumed dead.”

I took short, shallow breaths, and closed my eyes.

“Presumed dead? Or he is dead?” I whispered.

“I’m sorry ma’am. But that’s all I’m authorized to say. Would you like me to have a chaplain contact you?” He sounded far away. Like he was talking to me through a long tunnel.

“No, thank you.” I watched cars pull into parking spaces.

“The Casualty Assistance Officer from your husband’s command will be contacting you soon, Ma’am. Would you like me to contact the secondary next of kin?”

“What?”

“I believe it’s his mother.” Nothing he said made sense. It was like he was speaking a different language.

“No, thank you.” A silver Cadillac passed and the sunlight bounced off the rear view mirror blinding me. I put my hand up to shield my eyes. The world was white for a moment, tears stung my eyes, I was losing my breath, and a voice was speaking to me from a tunnel. That was the moment. *Déjà vu*.

I didn’t wait for him to say goodbye. I just let the phone slide from my hand onto the sidewalk. I don’t even know if the call had ended. My head was spinning. I leaned forward and let out all the air in my lungs in a gasping scream. It bubbled through my tears and my head pounded. I kept leaning. I couldn’t stop.

I was numb through the funeral. It took a week for the Navy to send you home, and every night I laid awake afraid to close my eyes because when I did, I’d see you lying next to me, smiling. A little trickle of blood seeping from the corner of your mouth, or the back of your head

cracked open. Eventually, I'd pass out and you'd be standing in front of me, your eyes missing, or your throat cut, or your guts spilling out of your body.

I was waiting for you at the hangar when you arrived. The feeling of relief never came. When I saw the casket, it was like my chest was being crushed. They opened it, right there in the hangar, so I could confirm it was you. At least your eyes were closed. You looked peaceful.

I just stood there wondering if it hurt. They said it was quick. That you didn't feel much pain. I'm sure they say that to everyone, but I was there when my grandfather died, and I saw the photos of that bombing. At least your eyes were closed. That's a small comfort.

I watched the pall bearers carry the casket into the chapel and felt as though someone was suffocating me. I wanted to jump out of my seat and open the lid and let you breathe one last time, but it was closed and draped with an American flag. Your mom set your photo on top of the casket, and your dad set a flower arrangement next to frame. Your brother said a prayer and everyone said, "Amen."

The chaplain spoke and a member of the Navy Brass Band played "Taps." Outside the chapel, the color guard shot a 21 gun salute and I flinched. But, I didn't cry. How could I? It was our last goodbye. Everyone kept calling you a hero, like it was some kind of honor, like I was supposed to take comfort in the idea.

But I still had to go home that night, to my empty bed in my empty house. I couldn't sleep. I wanted to go down to graveside and dig you up to see your body one more time, to reassure myself that your eyes were closed. Instead, I just lay awake all night squeezing my pillow and counting the seconds.

For the last few days, I've reminded myself that I'm just supposed to take it "One day at a time." That's what they said at the funeral home. "Just take it one day at a time. Don't think too

far ahead.” All I can think about is getting out of here. Out of this stifling little house. Away from all this pain.

I could just let the movers pack everything for me. I could just let the base housing office clean the place. But they wouldn’t have done things the way I will.

I didn’t want to open your closet. Didn’t want to smell your scent again. It’s already faded from your pillow, and I want to keep it that way to make things easier. But, I didn’t want strangers touching your things either, handling them carelessly. It was strangers who sent back your personal things – books, music, photos, letters. They pawed through all of it. I didn’t want that to happen to the rest of it, so I forced myself to open the closet doors, and it’s like you were in the room with me again.

I yanked out the clothes hangers, one by one. The camo, the khakis, the working whites – all in the bag to the base thrift store. Then I got to the dress whites that you wore on our wedding day – the day you promised to be with me for the rest of our lives – and I stopped and held them a while and remembered the last time I saw you.

You just said goodbye. A short hug and quick kiss and then...goodbye. We were supposed to spend the rest of our lives together, and you acted like it didn’t hurt to leave. Now, I’m here, and all I have left are these things. These paltry reminders of the life I didn’t really have.

I took the uniform carefully off the hanger and folded it so the creases were all in the right places. I slid it into a bag and set it at the bottom of the box. You don’t have many civilian clothes. The t-shirt and jeans you wore on our first date, the flannel shirt and the corduroys you liked to wear in the winter, the khakis and button down you wore to church. Each shirt, each pair of pants, each sweater, an item from your real life. Your life with me. Your life out of uniform.

On top, I put the ball cap you wore on our first date. The one you pretended would hide you from people you knew, so you could be with me.

It wasn't enough. They found you anyway and took you away from me.

I still panic every time the phone rings, still shake with every knock at the door, still dread the telegram being delivered, still have trouble sleeping in a newly empty bed in a newly empty house. I'm still waiting for the relief of knowing it's all over. I don't think it's going to come. Not until we're together.

The movers will be here tomorrow and the housing office will come to do a final inspection. But tonight, I'm finally alone. I can finally give into the tears and admit that I'm not strong. I've taken the sleeping pills, and now I'm hugging the bear you won for me on our first date. I was going to give it to our son, but he won't need it now. You couldn't give me the rest of your life, but I can give you mine. Maybe we'll be reincarnated and we can finally have a chance to build our lives together. Don't worry. I'll count the seconds so I don't hold on too long.

The Soul Collector

Long ago, the boatman was forbidden from speaking to flesh and blood. He worked in silence as he collected newly departed souls and escorted them to his boat. When they were safely fording the rivers, he would talk with them and assure them that they were safe, gently teaching them to speak with their spirits. It was often difficult for them to see him, appearing as little more than a shadow at first, but as they acknowledged their new state of being, their vision cleared and they could see the outline of his spirit just as they could see their own.

And so it was for generations. He was present when Adam took his last breath and when Christ surrendered his soul, when Sodom and Gomorrah burned and when Hiroshima fell. He has entered many rooms in which he was not welcome and many in which he was hoped for like an old friend. Never before had he been greeted. Not until he arrived to collect Grace.

“Hello?” The little girl was lying in the hospital bed, connected to monitors that beeped and tubes that dripped. “Who’s there?”

The nurse didn’t acknowledge the boatman when he entered the room. She didn’t acknowledge the little girl. It was as if the girl was speaking only to him. He walked over to Grace’s bed, looked at her, walked around her and saw that her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow.

“Are you here for me?” Her lips barely moved, and he realized that she was speaking only to him, and that she did so with her soul.

The nurse was looking at the girl’s chart and checking the machines. When she saw the girl’s lips move, she called out, “Grace? Gracie? Can you hear me?”

“It hurts,” Gracie said to the boatman. “Are you here to make it stop hurting?”

The nurse ran out of the room.

“You’re here for me aren’t you?” she was very weak.

He nodded. He could see the faint outline of her soul as its shadow began to form.

“Good,” she said, relieved.

He gestured to the door for her to follow him. His boat was waiting on the other side.

Her eyelids fluttered, and her legs twitched. “I’m stuck. I can’t move.”

He whispered, “Shh.”

“Help me, please. I don’t know how to get out. It hurts.”

“Shhh,” he whispered again.

Grace was quiet. She stopped moving and listened. She could hear the water lapping at the side of his boat, feel the gentle rocking as it maintained its mooring along the river bank, and she saw the sunlight shimmer through the willow branches. As she allowed the calm quiet of the river to sooth her, her shadow fell away from her flesh and blood. The nurse rushed back in to the room with Grace’s mother.

The monitors had begun to squeal, and the nurse punched buttons, moved wires, and adjusted tubes. Grace noticed none of it – she only looked ahead. The boatman gestured for the girl to follow just as her mother calmly touched the girl’s hand. Grace could see the worries and fears buried in her mother’s soul – the pain, the sadness, her families lives lived in regret and misery – the souls of those they loved would be lost. She turned to look at her mother as she spoke to the boatman. “I can’t go with you today. I have to stay. She’ll be lost without me, and they’ll all be ruined. They’re not strong enough yet.”

She slowly put on her broken flesh and tainted blood as she wept with pain. “I wish they were stronger.” Before her shadow faded completely, she asked, “You’ll come back for me won’t you?”

He nodded. Everyone must be collected.

Though it was not the first time a collection had been delayed, it was the first time a soul had addressed the boatman before being collected. He asked the master how this was possible and was told simply: “One prayer changed everything.”

Long ago, there was a famine. In this time, many souls were collected. They were not surprised to meet the boatman, most were relieved, but mothers still wailed for their children and wives still mourned their husbands. And so it was when the boatman entered the home of a widow who was huddled over her son. The boy’s shadow had already fallen away from his body, and his soul was nearly ready to depart. The widow could sense that the loss of her son was imminent, and she prayed fervently. “I have already lost my husband, Lord. And now, am I to be alone in this world? Please God, spare my son!”

When the boy’s shadow fell, he no longer heard his mother weeping and did not look back as he followed the boatman. The boy was calm on the boat, reserved and resigned, watching the shoreline as they passed trees and navigated the forks and bends in the river.

“I saw a man of God,” the boy said. “He was a prophet. I was hoping to see him save our land.” It was his only regret. He did not worry about what would become of his mother because he knew that soon enough, they would be reunited.

The river was calm, the rowing was easy, and the cargo was light. The quiet murmur of the water was matched by the call of the whippoorwill. Along the marshy riverbanks, souls struggled against the current, pulling themselves through low hanging willow branches, and climbing over one another.

“Who are these people swimming in the water?” The boy pointed to the lost souls on either side of the boat. “Why aren’t you pulling them in, too?”

“They will drag us in with them, and we will all be lost.”

The boy considered them.

“Many people have crossed many waters in my boats. They have all been delivered safely. In the water, you see the people who have denied the truth, rejected their fate, and are trying to go back and rejoin whatever they left behind. Most of them have been in the water a very long time.”

“Is this place unpleasant? This place where you are taking me?”

“No. It is my favorite place to be. I long for the day when I must no longer leave it.”

The boy said nothing more until he was greeted by the master.

“Welcome, my good and faithful one,” the master said to the boy. “You are to return.”

“Why?” the boy asked, alarmed.

“My prophet has made this request on behalf of your mother. He is faithful, and I will grant his petition. Through him, I will heal your land.” Then the master turned the boy around and set him back in the boat.

“Master, I have never taken a soul back. What will happen?” the boatman asked, unsure of how to chart such a voyage.

The master’s voice was warm when he spoke. “They will have hope.”

The tides changed that day. Rivers flooded into one another, and many lakes became as large as small seas. The souls in the river tried to swim to the boat and climb aboard, but every time they left the shoreline, they were swept away with the current. Their cries for help echoed through the trees like mourners at a graveside.

The boy called out to them and tried to tell them about the kindness of the master and the safety of the river bank, but they could not hear him.

“Why do they not listen?” he asked.

“They can not hear you.”

“I can hear them.”

“Yes,” the boatman replied. “They are deaf because they refuse to hear the truth. You can hear me and speak to me because you have learned to accept that you are not flesh and blood.”

“What am I?”

“Spirit and soul. It is with our souls that we are speaking. It is with our spirit that we know the truth.”

When the boy returned, he taught the prophet how to speak with his soul. The prophet performed many miracles and healed the land by crying out with his soul for fire and then for rain. It gave people hope and they thrived. The prophet taught another man to speak with his soul, and that man became a prophet also, and so the gift passed from one to another.

The time of the prophets was over; yet this girl, Grace, possessed the ability to speak with her soul. The boatman asked the master again how it was possible for the child to possess such a gift.

“She lives in an extraordinary time in which faith itself is a miracle,” the master replied.

“Her faith is stronger than she knows.”

The boatman saw glimpses of Grace as she grew when he collected passengers from the hospital where she was often a patient. He heard stories from children who had known her, and he discovered that she would share her toys with them and often was their only friend. Her company gave them comfort and the strength to let go of the painful burden their flesh had

become. He saw her praying with children whose families had given up hope. Sometimes, he would pause in his collections and watch as Grace laughed with children whose flesh was broken and weak, and he could see that their strength was slowly restored.

One afternoon, he was sent to a busy intersection near the hospital to collect a soul. He was told there would be an accident, and he arrived early to usher the soul into the boat before it could feel any pain. There was a lull in the commotion of traffic, and a group of people on the sidewalk stepped off the curb. Just a few yards away, a car turned onto the street. The sun was in the driver's eyes, and she could not see the people in front of her. Everyone stopped, hoping she would see them. Everyone except Grace, now a young woman, who was in the middle of the car's path. She tried to run to get out of the way, but she could not make it across the street in time to avoid being hit.

Just as the car made contact with her, she shouted with everything in her being, "Not now!" and the boatman shoved her out of the way. She tumbled to the curb, the car screeched to a stop, and the crowd surrounded her to see that she was alright. She stood up and brushed herself off, looking around to see who had pushed her out of the way. As the people swarmed around her, checked her arms and legs for cuts and bruises, the boatman waited. Waited for instructions. Waited for the consequences. Waited to be summoned. The summons never came.

When he saw the master, the boatman was penitent.

"Why are you sorry?" the master asked.

"Your plan was diverged because of me. I failed to collect the girl."

"And what makes you believe my plan was not fulfilled by your actions? When it is her time, nothing will prevent her collection."

Years later, he collected the soul of a woman who witnessed the entire event. She was a preschool teacher who had once been a prostitute. She was quiet on the boat, thoughtful and serene as she hummed to herself and smiled at the call of the whippoorwill. When she leaned over the edge of the boat, the boatman cautioned her against jumping into the water.

“I don’t want to go back. I just wanted to feel the water. Is that okay?”

He nodded.

“I don’t really deserve to be here.”

“Many people feel it is an injustice,” he said. “That is why so many try to go back.”

“No. It’s not injustice. It’s the mercy that I don’t deserve. I haven’t really lived a life of faith.”

“It takes great faith to accept death.”

“I suppose,” she paused. “But I think it takes more faith to believe that we matter.”

He waited while she collected her thoughts.

“I was going to kill myself, you know? I’d gotten myself into a lot of trouble. I lost control, and I figured there was no way out. I bought some rat poison and sleeping pills, and I was on my way home standing on the corner in a crowd of people waiting for the light to turn green thinking that none of them would notice if I just dropped dead or if I ran out in front of a car or something.

“The light turned green, and we all started to cross the street, and there was this car that came speeding around a corner. I looked up, and there was a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen, standing, dumbstruck, in the middle of the road. She couldn’t get out of the way. I mean, I expected her to go flying over the windshield or something. And I swear, I saw the car hit her. I know it did. Everyone else said they saw her jump out of the way, but I know what I saw.

“She rolled to the curb out of the way of the wheels, and then she just stood up, like nothing happened, like she tripped and fell or something. Everyone rushed over to see if she was okay, and she brushed herself off. It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. The car screeched to a stop, the driver got out, and she was shaking all over. She kept saying, ‘I couldn’t see. I couldn’t see.’

“And this big man got right up in her face and yelled, ‘Then why did you keep driving?’ I thought there was going to be a huge fight or something.

“But the girl walked over to the driver and said, ‘I’m okay. Look, my hands are scraped, that’s all. I’m okay. Really.’ And then she hugged the woman and said, ‘You’ve got to stop shaking before you get back in the car. You’ll hurt yourself if you don’t.’

“It was astonishing. I mean, really unbelievable. The man just stood there and looked at the girl and said, ‘That’s it? You’re just going to let her drive away? You could have died!’

“But she turned to him and said, just as calm and patient as if she were talking to a child, ‘I was given a second chance. There’s no reason why I can’t give one to someone else. When it’s my time to go, I’ll go. Nothing in this world will be able to stop me.’

“I’ve made a lot of stupid choices, and for a very long time, my life was hell. But, I put myself there, you know? When I saw that – I don’t know. I decided I needed to try again. It was like a second chance. When I left my old life, I couldn’t imagine anything better. But, this. This is a chance I don’t deserve. It’s paradise. There are so many others who should be here, not me.” She splashed the water.

“This is not paradise,” he said.

She looked at him, questioning.

“Paradise is yet to come.”

At the shore, she fell into the master's arms. He held her and hushed her crying.

"Welcome, my good and faithful one."

When the boatman saw Grace again, she was kneeling at the side of her grandfather. He was already prepared to leave by the time the boatman arrived. The old man watched as the girl and her father tried to revive him.

"Do you think they realize I'm not in there?" the grandfather asked. He watched his family as they cried out in grief. "I hate to leave them like this. Do you think I could wait until everything is better?"

"It is time."

The old man nodded.

Grace nodded also. "It's time," she whispered from her soul.

"She hears you?" the old man asked the boatman as he touched Grace's shoulder. "I always knew there was something different about her, but --"

"It's time," Grace whispered.

The boatman guided the way to the boat.

The old man sighed a little when he passed his wife who wept on the shoulder of Grace's mother. "She'll be fine without me, won't she? I hate to leave her alone."

Grace did not look at the boatman or the shadow of the old man. Her eyes were closed as she responded, with the earnestness of a prayer, "She'll be fine. Sad, but not alone."

The old man smiled and followed the boatman through the door. "Yes. She'll be fine."

He did not look back as the boat pushed away. He only looked ahead. "So, where are you taking me?" he asked.

"To the other side."

“Of?”

“The river.”

“Well, wherever it is, I’m looking forward to it.” He lamented nothing. He was at peace, like the widow’s son, resigned with knowing that soon enough he would be joined by those he loved.

“Your granddaughter has great faith,” the boatman said.

“She certainly does. I think she gets it from her mother.” He smiled as he remembered. “When she was really little, just after her sister was born, she insisted on going to a hotel for the night. It was the funniest thing. She walked up to her dad one afternoon and told him she wanted to go to the place where you called on a phone and someone in a red uniform brought you dinner on a table with wheels. He told her maybe someday, but she wouldn’t let it go. Kept insisting she couldn’t possibly sleep that night unless she knew someone would bring her breakfast on a little silver tray first thing in the morning.

“For some reason, they decided to indulge her and they went to a hotel for the night. It had been raining for most of the day, but they had no idea there was a tornado warning. The next morning they drove back to their neighborhood, and there was a tree in the middle of the kids’ bedrooms and half the windows were shattered. If they’d been home, all of the kids would have been dead and my son and daughter-in-law would have been seriously injured.

“Soon after Gracie’s mother married my son, they were told they’d never have kids. That woman prayed and prayed for a baby and years later, still no children. We figured they’d adopt sooner or later, but my daughter-in-law just said she’d be patient. After they’d been married seven years, Gracie was born and we were so thrilled to have a grandchild that it never occurred

to us there'd be more. But two years later, they had a boy, and two years after that they had another girl.

"It all seemed too good to be true, but then when Gracie got sick and she nearly died, we thought maybe God was balancing things out somehow. My daughter-in-law stayed by Gracie's side and prayed day and night and wouldn't accept anything the doctors said. Even when the doctor came in and said that it was just a matter of days and we all needed to say our goodbyes, she just shook her head and refused to believe him. She always had more than enough faith for all of us, but at the time, I just thought she was being stubborn.

"When Gracie woke up, she turned to her mother and said, 'Mommy, don't worry. I'm fine.' I tell you what, if that wasn't enough to make me believe in the power of prayer, I don't know what would have been better.

"Right after Gracie got out of the hospital, my wife and I were at my son's house helping him with the kids so he could take care of Gracie. I was in the den and everyone else was having lunch. Gracie touched her dad's arm and said, 'Go find Grandpa. Something's wrong.'

"Sure enough, there was something wrong. When my son walked in and found me, I was having a massive heart attack. The doctor said if he'd been a minute later, I'd have been a goner. I don't know how she knew. That girl is something else.

"I know it's strange, because she's still so young, but she's always had a way of making the people around her feel safe. Like, someone really is looking out for us, you know?

The boatman nodded.

The old man pointed to the souls in the water. "Anyone ever make it back?" he asked.

"I have returned many souls at the command of the master. They can not go back on their own"

“They probably didn’t know what they had until they were gone.” The old man leaned his elbows against the side of the boat and watched the lost souls as they struggled. “Sad really. Can they just go to – I don’t know what you call it – wherever it is you deliver people?”

“No one has ever tried.”

“Never?” he asked.

The boatman shook his head. “They have rejected Paradise. It is as though they never saw it.”

The old man looked past the souls struggling in the water and watched the whippoorwill hop along the branches of the willows growing on the river bank. He shook his head, “It really is sad.”

The boatman could only reply, “It takes great faith to accept death.”

The old man greeted the master like an old friend and walked up the path of well trod grass over the hill of the river bank. He did not look back; he only looked ahead and smiled as the sunlight shone on his face. The boatman sighed a little when he rowed away, longing for the day when he no longer would be required to leave his favorite place.

A generation passed and the boatman heard tales of Grace and met people who had been strengthened by her kindness. He also saw many more souls join the lost in the river, and he shuddered at the idea of never again seeing Paradise.

One day, he was told of impending disaster and warned by the master that “There will be many casualties. Be vigilant on your voyage. A woman of extraordinary faith has made an extraordinary request and the tides would soon be changing.”

The boatman loosened the mooring, and as he pushed off from the bank, the river rose. He navigated around the bends and the new forks which appeared as the rivers converged into

the lakes and the lakes flooded the land. The lost souls were tossed by the rapids and the flesh and blood were toppled by the waves.

In the trees, souls shivered, frightened and weak, unable to protect themselves from the force of the winds that howled around them like mothers crying for their children. The souls of the lost cried out for mercy but could not hear the boatman calling out to them. He calmly rowed into the tempest to collect them as their shadows fell and comfort them with the safety of the boat.

The newly departed huddled together on the hull of the boat as if they could still feel the cold. Some of them saw their flesh and blood in the water and screamed in horror as they realized they had been separated. When the winds subsided and the waters calmed, he collected souls from trees, rooftops, and debris floating through the water.

He pushed the boat through a thicket of tree tops and found a woman sitting on a roof. As he moved closer, he could see that she was surrounded by men, women, and children whose shadows had begun to form. When she stood to greet him, he realized it was Grace.

“You’ve come. I knew you would.” She spoke boldly.

He nodded.

“I’d like to keep them a little longer,” she said as she pointed to the shadows which surrounded her. “It’s not their time.”

“All must be collected,” he responded, unsure if she might collapse under the weight of his voice.

“Yes. But not today. They’re needed here a little longer.”

“All must be collected,” he repeated and pointed to the boat.

“They’re holding on. I think they can make it,” she said. One man’s shadow began to fall, and Grace bent down to touch him. “If you take them now, while they’re weak, they’ll be lost forever, drowned in their own misery.”

“If it is their time, there is nothing we can do.”

“It’s not time yet,” Grace whispered to the man. His pain eased, and his shadow began to fade.

She saw a child floating through the water, his lips were purple and his face was swollen. The boatman reached out to help him into the boat but stopped when the boy looked at him and started to scream.

“What’s the matter?” Grace asked.

“He is among the lost. I can not help him.”

Grace reached out to him and he scrambled onto the roof. She held him in her arms and rocked him back and forth. “Shhh,” she whispered. “It’s okay. No one is going to hurt you my darling. Listen.”

The boy looked at her and whimpered.

“Shh,” she whispered again.

The boy was silent, and his eyes widened when he realized he could hear the water lapping against the side of the boat and see the sun light through the trees. He looked around and saw the boatman standing with his arm outstretched, ready to help the boy onto the boat. Grace smiled at him and nodded, “It’s time sweetheart. It’s time for you to go with him. No one will hurt you.”

The boy stood and the boatman lifted him onto the boat where he sat calm and peaceful. The boatman turned to Grace and pointed at the flesh and blood that surrounded her. “What will you do with them? You have no boat.”

“One will come,” she replied.

“How do you know?”

“I have hope,” she said.

The boatman pushed the boat around, carefully picking through the treetops.

“You’ll come back for me, won’t you?” she called after him. “I’m not strong enough to do this forever.”

He nodded. “All must be collected.”

Vita

Katrina Kimbril was born in Texas to a submariner in the US Navy and a preacher's daughter from South Carolina. Katrina comes from a long line of people who serve "God and country," though generally not in that order, and tends to write about these themes. She followed in the family tradition by majoring in Church Ministries (and English) at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida and then marrying a man in the US Navy who was soon stationed near New Orleans. Having discovered that a hurricane had been named after her, and finding herself totally unable to find a job because no one wanted to say her name, she became a teacher and now people think her name is Kimbril. She currently lives in South Carolina and teaches high school students English as a second language.